

BOOKS

[*A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005*, Annie Leibovitz, Random House, 472 pages]

Portrait of the Artist

By Kelly Jane Torrance

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ is almost as famous as the celebrities she displays: her name inevitably conjures up countless iconic images created over a 37-year career. The photographer recently claimed the first and second spots when the American Society of Magazine Editors voted on the best magazine images of the last four decades. (First was the *Rolling Stone* cover of a naked John Lennon curled around a clothed Yoko Ono, taken the day the musician was murdered. Second was a pregnant—and naked—Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.) When a controversial cover is published, the sex appeal of a celebrity splashed over the page, the first thing that comes to everyone's mind is: looks like a Leibovitz.

Photographs—like Leibovitz's recent shots of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes's daughter Suri—help feed our appetites for details of the private lives of the stars. But unlike most of the celebrities whose lives she chronicles, Leibovitz's own life has remained hidden. That changed with the publication of her new book, *A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005*.

It's not so much Leibovitz who is revealed here, however, as it is those closest to her. There are few pictures of the photographer. But there are many revelatory photos of her family and, especially, of her lover.

The 15 years the book encapsulates correspond almost directly, Leibovitz writes in an introduction, with the time she spent with Susan Sontag. The critic and novelist, who died of cancer in 2004,

was the very definition of a public intellectual. But she kept her private life private. Sontag and Leibovitz never acknowledged their relationship to the press; the *New York Times* couldn't even get Sontag's son to confirm it for the obituary, though it was apparently common knowledge in New York intellectual circles. Now their life together—and some of its most intimate details—is splashed all over a highly publicized book. More controversially, so is Sontag's death. Leibovitz captures her lover ravaged by cancer in her final days and even as she lies dead. She photographed her father, who died just weeks after Sontag, in the same manner.

The images are as striking as they are shocking. "All photographs are memento mori," Susan Sontag wrote in her 1977 book *On Photography*. It's unlikely she imagined then that the difference between her lively intellectual self and her lifeless body would be captured between two covers.

A Photographer's Life is a rather odd sort of coffee-table book, combining in strange ways two of our ruling obsessions, celebrity and death. Vibrant pictures of A-list actors compete for our attention alongside scenes of genocide in Rwanda and the two-dimensional equivalent of death masks. Leibovitz's meandering introduction is not much help in sorting out the confusion. "I don't take a lot of purely personal pictures," she says, before writing that she considered making this a book of purely personal pictures. But she decided that a realistic chronicle of her life had to include both Susan Sontag and Scarlett Johansson. "I don't have two lives," she writes. "This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it."

One might almost think that her life is not so different from our own. The book is filled with the sort of pictures we all take, albeit of a rather better quality. There are family gatherings during Thanksgiving; beach vacations with nieces and nephews frolicking in the water; companions contemplating foreign grandeur; the death of loved ones and the birth of new ones.

But it doesn't take shots of Jack Nicholson to remind readers that Leibovitz's is no ordinary life. The photographer's work has provided her with more than just a household name; the book could be subtitled *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Few of us take holiday shots in Jordan, and even fewer stay there with the aid of Queen Noor and King Hussein. Many of the photos from Leibovitz's world travels feature tables in hotel rooms lavishly laid with top-quality room service. The effect is almost as opulent as a *Vogue* photograph of Nicole Kidman.

The personal is easily distinguished from the professional here. The personal is always black and white; the professional usually in glorious color. The personal is mostly candid; the professional often staged. But they're all Leibovitz. "I began calling myself a portrait photographer because it lent a kind of dignity to shooting well-known people," she says in the introduction, in what may strike many as a pretentious remark. But Leibovitz might actually be selling herself short. This photographer traffics in fantasy. Her photographs of celebrities don't just capture personalities, they create personae.

Her personal photographs do too. Leibovitz's large family—five brothers and sisters—seems to have served as an inspiration for the visual artist. Her mother comes across as a particular character, and Leibovitz has captured her in many moods, from pensive to exuberant. Marilyn Leibovitz was a dancer, and she seems unable to keep from moving. Walking on the beach with her grandson, she kicks her leg in the air with a comical grace. It's hard to resist the feeling that we know something of this woman after seeing her in these photos. That's a dangerous feeling, of course, but one a book like this practically forces upon the reader. I couldn't help wondering, for example, why Susan Sontag doesn't appear in a single photograph taken at Leibovitz family gatherings. Did the photographer compartmentalize her life? Or did Sontag and Leibovitz's insistence on privacy extend even to their loved ones?

No one is a bigger character in this book, after all, than Susan Sontag. There is a photograph of Sontag placed before the book's introduction that says much about her. She's called simply "Susan" in the title. She's in Milan but dressed completely unfashionably, with a pair of white sneakers that, judging from other photographs, were omnipresent. A typewriter sits unobtrusively in the corner. She's lying on a bed with sheets of paper and books, some in other languages. There's no room for her to do anything but curl up. The subject is a celebrity, but the picture is in great contrast to the other celebrity portraits in the book. Most were carefully considered, meant to declare the subject's role loudly: Jack Nicholson as Movie Star, Arnold Schwarzenegger as Uberman. But a quieter, candid photograph taken on a whim and without thought of publication reveals more of the subject's personality than a photograph staged to do just that.

Of course, Leibovitz's skill for making a staged photograph seem spontaneous makes one suspicious of what looks to be real. There's a picture Sontag took of Leibovitz, nude and eight months pregnant. It's reminiscent of that famous Demi Moore shot and perhaps purposely so. In the Moore shot, heavy makeup and a diamond as big as the Ritz reminded us—even if she wasn't wearing a shred of clothing—that the subject was a star. Here framed photographs in the background remind us that this naked woman, soon to be a mother, is also a photographer.

Leibovitz's love for Sontag is all over the pages. But one wonders what the woman who wouldn't publicly acknowledge their relationship would think of being so exposed. The revelations run from the small—a picture of the thinker sleeping—to the significant—Sontag taking a bath, a dying Sontag comatose in a hospital bed. Leibovitz's celebrity work invariably shouts, "Look at me!" But what do her no less focused pictures of family and friends, who seem to prefer private lives, say?

From the first picture of a nude Sontag sleeping, it's impossible not to feel like a

voyeur. That is somewhat tempered when one sees on the very next page topless self-portraits of Leibovitz. She's just as willing to reveal herself. And then you turn the page once again and see pictures of a fighter plane followed by Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf, followed by those famous pictures of Demi Moore. The effect is dizzying. Perhaps it's meant to be. The array of images keeps one from focusing on the important thing that Leibovitz has done here.

A Photographer's Life is a confessional, and that's why it has proved controversial. Pictures have an immediacy that words never will. Confessional memoirs have caused trouble enough. But an image—evidence, not hearsay—of a person's most intimate secrets is on another level still. The Sontag that remained in most of our minds was an attractive young woman crowned by that trademark black hair with its decisive stripe. Leibovitz captures her entirely unrecognizable, her hair an old woman's closely cropped white.

The photographer anticipated anger. In her defensive introduction, she implies that she was carrying out the duty of an artist without even realizing it: "I forced myself to take pictures of Susan's last days." "I didn't analyze it then. I just knew I had to do it." "I was in a trance when I took the pictures of her lying there [dead]." Has she analyzed it since?

Perhaps no one has done more than Annie Leibovitz to make celebrities the gods of the 21st century. Her breathtaking photos inspire nothing less than worship. Perhaps *A Photographer's Life*, then, is to serve as a mea culpa. Nicole Kidman would never let Leibovitz photograph her as a real person, imperfect and just as subject to the ravages of age as the rest of us. But Sontag did, even if she never meant for the photos to be seen. Through her personal relationship with one professional contact—she met Sontag when she photographed her for a book cover—Leibovitz has succeeded in calling her entire career into question.

It's hard not to think Sontag herself led Leibovitz to this crossroads. Most of the

pictures in the book that might be called political were taken in Sarajevo during the war. Leibovitz went there with Sontag; it was a cause close to the writer's heart. She hints in the introduction that Sontag was a warm critic of her work and constantly pushed her to do more—to do something that mattered. But that's not Annie Leibovitz. Her Sarajevo pictures are beautiful and tragic. But lots of photo-journalists take similar pictures. No one else can do a Leibovitz portrait.

In her introduction, Leibovitz implies that she's merely an observational photographer, not an interactive one. But as anyone who flips through *Vanity Fair* knows, her work is some of the most staged photography done today. She contradicts herself on this score, as she does on so many others: "I'm not a journalist," she writes. "A journalist doesn't take sides, and I don't want to go through life like that. I have a more powerful voice as a photographer if I express a point of view."

She's certainly expressed many here. None are as important as the idea that death comes to all; fame can only grant metaphorical immortality. But that's not the kind that matters to most people, especially the friends and lovers of those who have died.

In the essay that opens this important book, Leibovitz seems conflicted about her career. "I feel a great affinity with him," she writes of 18th-century English landscape and portrait painter Wright of Derby. "I can see how you might want to turn your back on society and paint lakes and mountains." Leibovitz's landscapes are a bit dull. Her portrait work rarely is. Sometimes it's pretentious. Sometimes it's shocking. But it usually gets our attention. Rather than turning her back on society, Leibovitz should continue to embrace it. *A Photographer's Life* marks a new phase for our most famous celebrity chronicler. In an age when we're all starstruck, we need someone like her to bring us back down to earth. ■

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[*The End of Alliances*, Rajan Menon, Oxford University Press, 272 pages]

Old Pacts & New Realities

By Doug Bandow

THE PUBLIC IS FOCUSED on Iran and Iraq, but in his new book, Rajan Menon looks beyond today's crises to argue that the U.S. "is in the early stages of a paradigm shift in grand strategy." He believes that America's alliance-based foreign policy will inevitably, if haphazardly, come to an end.

His argument is simple yet powerful. The disappearance of the post-World War II world has eliminated the *raison d'être* of Washington's major security commitments. Explains Menon, a professor at Lehigh University:

[O]ur alliances in Europe and Asia are dispensable. What's more, they have become impediments that inhibit creative strategic thinking at home, while infantilizing our partners who live under the American shadow. I reject the notion that the end of alliances will bring misfortunes. Forced to develop the strategies and capacities needed for their own security, America's allies will respond effectively. They lack neither the intelligence nor the means to do so; what they do lack, on account of their comfortable reliance on American power, is the will.

Old paradigms die hard. Pointing to the French and Soviet revolutions, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, Menon observes, "The forces that produced each of these transformations did not appear like thunderbolts; they had been at work for years, perhaps even decades, but were little noticed because they were screened out by the dominant intellectual frames of reference."

So it is with today's policy of promiscuous intervention. Containment ultimately worked: the U.S. and its allies won the Cold War. Unfortunately, this success has inhibited change. Explains Menon, "In light of containment's longevity and track record, it's not hard to see why there is such strong resistance to seeing the alliances with Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea as anything other than pivotal."

Policymakers are not stupid. They recognize that circumstances have changed. For Menon, what the foreign-policy establishment "does not, in the main, concede—because intellectual habits and bureaucratic routines are fertilized by familiarity—is that the new world threatens to make those alliances superfluous."

He recognizes that alliances are a legitimate policy tool and will remain relevant as long as states "must rely on their wits and resources to secure their safety, so long as there is no international analogue to national governments and police forces, and so long as there are revisionist regimes bent on remaking an existing order." Menon's point is that America's Cold War alliances no longer serve America's interests.

While the Cold War cemented internationalism, the U.S. had traditionally eschewed fixed security commitments. Thomas Paine argued that one reason to separate from Great Britain was to avoid involvement in Europe's wars. This approach dominated American policy for 150 years.

Menon does not view containment—particularly with regard to aggressive nation-building—as at all consistent with prior U.S. foreign policy: "The various permanent alliances, the magnitude of defense spending, the size and scale of the overseas military presence, the global scope of U.S. strategy, and the forces configured to allow the rapid projection of American power—these attributes of containment were not variations on an existing theme. They represented a revolution, not an evolution, in grand strategy and were both expansive and expensive." The attack on Pearl

Harbor permanently re-oriented American foreign policy, leading the United States to voluntarily entangle itself in the Old World's quarrels.

The keystone of Washington's alliance structure is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, created to prevent Soviet domination of Western Europe. Writes Menon, "Because the cold war lasted for nearly half a century, most Americans cannot remember a time when the Atlantic alliance was not an essential item in our strategic toolkit or a staple of our foreign policy lexicon."

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact have eliminated the longstanding justification for NATO. Thus far, finding a new purpose has failed. Menon calls Iraq "the tie that did not bind." Despite applying enormous pressure on its European allies, Washington won precious little support for its invasion of Iraq.

Even in nations whose governments supported the Bush administration, the populations vigorously opposed American policy. So too in Donald Rumsfeld's famed New Europe. Menon exposes the enormity of the trans-Atlantic rift, observing,

It was not just the withdrawal of Spain and Italy that showed that Iraq-like "out-of-area" interventions will not provide a reliable rationale for NATO's continued existence. As the insurgency in Iraq intensified and successive predictions of its imminent demise by senior American officials were undercut by relentless suicide bombings, ambushes, assassinations, kidnappings, and sectarian slayings, other NATO members began leaving Iraq.

Despite his belief that America and Europe are parting ways, Menon in no way embraces Robert Kagan's platitude that "America is from Mars, Europe is from Venus." Confronting neocon demagoguery, Menon argues that European opposition to Washington reflected substantive disagreement, not Gallic whimsy. Moreover, he notes, today no