

[*Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira De Mello and the Fight to Save the World, Samantha Power, Allen Lane, 640 pages*]

The Man from UNHCR

By Wayne Merry

BOOKS NOW OFTEN come with both title and subtitle to tweak the customer's attention. The subtitle of Samantha Power's new book certainly raised my eyebrows. "The Fight to Save the World"? Good Lord. Immediately, I recalled a volume from the opposite end of the political spectrum entitled *An End To Evil*. Surely these are tasks for a messiah, not mere mortals? No, our authors see them as legitimate ambitions for the American Republic.

In the case of Samantha Power, the issue is relevant given her close association with Barack Obama. Power worked in the senator's office and was an adviser to his campaign until her recent public gaffe describing Hillary Clinton as a "monster." Despite this misstep, she could reasonably anticipate a position in an Obama administration. Does she see the subject of her new book, the Brazilian-born United Nations humanitarian affairs official Sergio Vieira de Mello, as an inspiration for that putative role? Evidently. In the acknowledgments at the end of the volume she describes Obama as "the person whose rigor and compassion bear the closest resemblance to Sergio's that I have ever seen." What does the comparison imply for the counsel she might give a future president?

Sergio Vieira de Mello is a good subject for a biography, certainly more worthy than much of the political pulp that plagues an election year. He came to the world's attention as the earliest VIP victim of a terrorist bombing in Baghdad in August 2003, when the United Nations headquarters in Iraq was destroyed. By that time, Vieira de Mello had become something of a legend

within the UN system and among humanitarian organizations, although he was often a subject of controversy. Power's description of his painful and pointless death at the hands of al-Qaeda—which blamed him, among other things, for separating predominantly Catholic East Timor from largely Muslim Indonesia—is genuinely moving. There are hundreds of thousands of families around the globe today who owe their livelihoods, if not their very lives, to his efforts. That is a towering legacy for almost any individual, let alone one who operated within the limits of multilateral bureaucracy.

Vieira de Mello's career illustrates the dichotomy of a world that is flat in the distribution of individual talent but jagged in opportunities for that talent to flourish. A person born in Belgium or Botswana is just as likely to be gifted as one born in America or China, but far less likely to develop those gifts, especially in international public affairs.

Today, however, the multilateral sector provides outlets for the abilities and ambitions of people born outside the great powers. It is noteworthy that Vieira de Mello never served his native country in any capacity, and Brazil took official notice of him only after his death. He joined the UN almost by accident as a very young man—he needed some kind of job—but gave the institution a loyalty, dedication, and even passion often associated with patriotism. In an organization that was notorious for its time-servers and cynics, he believed that the UN spelled legitimacy. In an earlier century, he might have devoted his talents to a religious order, a corporation, or—given his early Marxist convictions—the Revolution.

Only 55 at the time of his death, Vieira de Mello had encountered a kind of inversion of the Peter Principle: he had not reached the limit of his own competence, but had exceeded that of the United Nations. His Baghdad mission was doomed by decisions already made in Washington, while in New York the UN leadership wanted to play a role in Iraq simply to demonstrate its continu-

ing relevance. As one UN official recalled, "That was the whole plan: Sergio will fix it." He died trying.

Power is balanced about her subject's virtues and contradictions, yet she does not recognize that a powerful motive for Vieira de Mello was the pursuit of adventure. This is nothing unusual: adventure is for young men what romance is for young women. And Vieira de Mello never lost the impulse, as he showed with his passion for "the field" and loathing for office work, his fitness and dress obsessions, his daring and risk-taking in very hazardous circumstances, his fondness for James Bond movies, his repeated romantic attachments, and sadly his neglect for his duties as a husband and father. In a different age, he might have been a conquistador. His charisma was powerful, but he used it to help the world's victims. He became, in essence, a humanitarian soldier of fortune. He certainly could have made a real fortune elsewhere.

Vieira de Mello repeatedly encountered the conflict between, as one colleague described it, "the UN that meets and the UN that does." Most of us see the UN through its deliberative and rhetorical bodies, but the system contains a number of semi-autonomous entities, some providing services that almost nobody else will. One of the most important is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which was Vieira de Mello's institutional home for most of his career. Often criticized by those with immaculate hands, UNHCR does much of the humanitarian dirty work the world prefers to ignore.

Vieira de Mello brought great intelligence, stamina, a sense of humor, and massive charm to the role. He was a genuinely considerate person, whether toward secretaries or refugees, but he hated making enemies. He was a highly manipulative and successful diplomat, even if he compulsively avoided giving offense, which effective diplomacy sometimes requires. Vieira de Mello courted controversy for pursuing the interests of refugees to the point of dealing without prejudice with the Khmer

Rouge leadership, authors of Central African genocide, and a raft of other unsavory characters in crisis situations around the world. Increasingly he recognized that humanitarian and human-rights standards often contradict each other. He almost always chose to shake hands with the devil in order to “deliver groceries” to the victims of armed conflicts. Over time, the ethical dilemmas of his job eroded his beliefs—though not his dedication.

The story of Sergio Vieira de Mello shows how influential governments of the world, including our own, maintain the United Nations as a vehicle for the inevitable moral compromises they would rather not face directly. From genocide to ethnic cleansing, from Rwanda to Cambodia, the UN is a mechanism of plausible deniability for its member states; it is a crucible for shameful acts—including acts of omission—that the modern media no longer permits governments to engage in themselves. If you think that overstates, read the book.

Samantha Power has written a persuasive biography but an unconvincing policy manual. I find it difficult to believe that Vieira de Mello himself would not have reacted to the title page with incredulity and even amusement. Chasing what “flame”? We are told in the epilogue, “the flame of idealism that motivated some to strive combat injustice.” That is pretty vague and could cover a host of sins as well as virtues. The greatest crimes are always justified by the highest ideals. And “saving the world”? Sergio Vieira de Mello was a man of ideals and of ambition, but he stopped far short of megalomania.

Perhaps Power should have advanced practical proposals for assisting humanitarian agencies—whether UN, national, or private—to deal with the violence that often overwhelms their efforts. Vieira de Mello never found a solution to this problem, though he wisely believed that soldiers make bad policemen. It was police he always needed and called for but never obtained in time or adequate numbers. There is a real humanitarian problem in need of a solution.

Ultimately, however, governments are not human beings. While the best accept some obligation to humanity, they must refuse the moral commitments of the genuinely good person, let alone those of the saintly. In many circumstances, governments must simply let things be. This is because governments—or states, in the more common international parlance—are driven by interests, not ethics. States have primary responsibilities to their citizens and to the perpetuation of the independence, freedom of action, security, wealth, and well being of their own societies. It is not the business of any government to “fight to save the world.”

Indeed, the crisis of our country’s position in the world today is in large measure the result of such utopian hubris. We tried to “transform” one corner of the world, while advocating something unclearly labeled “democracy,” and have reaped the whirlwind. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism got

us into this mess by seeking to “save the world.” It is the task of any future president to get us out. “To strive to combat injustice” won’t cut it. The United States is unable to enunciate any idealistic international program that would be widely accepted. No matter our motives or intent, the world will interpret our purpose as malicious. A generation ago, the reputation of this country around the globe stood far above that of the United Nations; today it is lower. The next president should try to rebuild our capacity to influence the world and our good name as a nation.

Whoever takes the oath of office on Jan. 20, 2009 will face external challenges guaranteed to relegate the issues raised by Samantha Power to the comparative sidelines of American policy. I do not say humanitarian issues are unimportant, but they must get in line behind other, more pressing problems. Do we really want to save the world? Then the top of my priority list would be stemming the proliferation of weapons and technologies of terrifying destructiveness. After that we need to formulate a multinational response to the spread of new forms of contagious disease, such as drug-resistant tuberculosis. Other crucial issues include global energy use, worldwide inflation in commodities, dislocations in trade and international finance, the continuing crisis of both legitimacy and competence of most Muslim states, and the broad shift of international relations from one centered on the trans-Atlantic region to one based around the Pacific. None of these topics figures in Power’s book, but all will be waiting in the Oval Office when the new occupant arrives. Even our great country can affect only the margins of global issues; America can best help humanity by tending to our legitimate role in the world and knowing when to walk by on the other side. ■

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[*The New York Intellectuals Reader*, Neil Jumonville, ed., Routledge, 456 pages]

Made in Manhattan

By Paul Gottfried

The New York Intellectuals Reader is a sequel of sorts to editor Neil Jumonville's earlier work *Critical Crossroads*, which dealt with some of the same figures of the New York highbrow set. In *Critical Crossroads*, Jumonville focused on *Partisan Review*, a journal founded in 1940 by a circle of mostly Jewish Leftists who were then breaking—or had already broken—from the Communist Party. In *The New York Intellectuals Reader*, we are presented with excerpts from this group's contributions to *Partisan Review* and other periodicals that they and their disciples founded and maintained over several generations.

Almost all of the writers here excerpted—Philip Rahv, Clement Greenberg, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, Meyer Schapiro, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and Sidney Hook—shared a similar ethnic background. They came from immigrant parents who had settled on New York's Lower East Side. The offspring of these immigrants studied and debated politics at City College of New York or Brooklyn College. Unlike the Sephardic and German Jews who had arrived before them in the U.S., the more easily identified and often radicalized Jews from Lithuania or the Ukraine encountered resistance throughout American society. Columbia and the other Ivies were reluctant to admit them as students and refused to hire them as professors until the 1950s. Of this group, the English professor Trilling and the art historian Schapiro were the first to make it onto the Columbia faculty. (Despite his adoption of Eastern European Jewish quirks, Richard Hofstadter,

who also joined Columbia, had a Protestant mother and had been raised as a Lutheran in Buffalo.)

Jumonville suggests that his subjects, having been denied other outlets for their theorizing energies, decided to found their own magazines. The reality was perhaps more complicated. With the exception of Dwight Macdonald, C. Wright Mill, Mary McCarthy and the German refugee Hannah Arendt, the *Partisan Review* circle seems to have been restricted to a specific Jewish subculture. *Partisan Review*, and later *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and *Encounter* were their publications of choice, magazines in which the contributors could present their own political, cultural, and existential concerns without having to please the gentile society from which they felt excluded. Each publication mirrored the mind and consciousness of the group that established it.

Jumonville divides his subjects into generational clusters, attaching certain attributes to each. He views the succession of generations—extending from such representative figures as Philip Rahv, to Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, down to Norman Podhoretz—as moving steadily in a particular ideological direction. As his subjects became increasingly assimilated to and comfortable in American life, they shifted toward the center and then toward the right.

The anthologist also notes certain pivotal themes that interested each particular generation. The first generation sought a leftist socialist position that would allow them to support revolutionary change without being identified with Stalin's dictatorship. They denounced McCarthyism and other manifestations of post-World War II anticommunism while simultaneously depicting the Soviets as "totalitarian." At the same time, this generation tried to push a certain kind of Marxist esthetic, stressing the social background of artistic and literary works. For those adopting this perspective, the principal adversaries were the New Critics, such as Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, and Cleanth Brooks, who were dismissive of social influence in their literary studies.

The second generation, typified by Bell, Kristol, and S.M. Lipset, overcame the alienation from American life and constructed the influential theory that the U.S. was experiencing the "end of ideology." In a moderate welfare-state democracy, with a vigorous mixed economy, the social conflicts that had plagued Europe and even an earlier America were things of the past. Americans might quarrel over political issues; they were not likely, however, to be divided again by sharp class differences. In the third generation, represented by Podhoretz and other neoconservatives, the same tendency continued to unfold. The descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who were active among New York's public intellectuals eventually claimed the mantle of American patriotism. The rise of this third cohort as leaders of the American conservative movement underscored this Americanizing process.

One of Jumonville's useful contributions is to note a frequently neglected characteristic of his first group. Members of the *Partisan Review* circle, exemplified by *PR* founder Rahv, flaunted their distance from American life. Until his death in 1973, Rahv went out of his way to call himself a "European." Although he and his colleagues had sprung from immigrant families that had come from the Eastern margin of European civilization, from Jewish ghettos in the Russian Pale of Settlement, they became eagerly European after arriving in the United States. This may have largely been a pose—in the same way that many of them sported French berets—but it reflected their deep anxiety about the "real America" across the Hudson, one that was imagined to be peopled by Protestant bigots and raving McCarthyites. Europe was safely at a distance, still ravaged from the last war, and Soviet armies had overrun the Eastern part of the continent. A prostrate Europe posed no threat to these intellectuals, who also incidentally showed little interest in Jewish nationalism.

There was a positive side to this obsession with things European. This