

# For Whom Ms. Bell Tolled



Did you know that it was a woman who was responsible for the mess in Iraq? No, I'm not thinking of the hysterical Maureen Dowd and her W-baiting,

increasingly impossible to read columns. It was Gertrude Bell. She was an archaeologist and professional traveler who spoke Arabic and Persian and who was appointed to the Arab bureau in Cairo during World War I by another person who took his desires for reality, Winston Churchill. Miss Bell was rich, upper class, arrogant but well meaning, a lover of all things Arabic—including women. She eventually became Oriental Secretary to the British High Commission in Iraq, and that is when the you-know-what hit the fan.

As some of you may remember, the Brits used to rule that miserable land, which they helped make miserable, incidentally. Between the most disastrous American president ever, Woodrow Wilson, and the most self-centered and arrogant of British prime ministers, Winston Churchill, they managed to ensure that the enclaves of people they mapped out in places like Yugoslavia and Iraq would remain at each other's throats for at least a century. Ethnic boundaries are very complex affairs, as those big shots in Versailles soon found out, but they hadn't taken into account the stupidity and arrogance of the two men I've just mentioned. But back to Miss Gertrude Bell.

The reason she's responsible is her sex. Just as the Sunnis today refuse to sit down and break pita bread with the Shi'ites, the Shi'ites were left outside the tent back in the '20s because their religious leaders refused to meet face-to-face with Gertrude. "May the fleas of a thousand camels infest my armpits before I sit down with a woman," announced a Shia at the time, or words to that effect.

I'm not taking any sides here; *The American Conservative* can hardly afford to lose our lesbian subscribers, but the Shi'ite elders had a point. Appointing a woman to represent the British Empire in talks with the Mesopotamians was tantamount to sending Leni Riefenstahl as the first German ambassador to Israel.

Bell, needless to say, gave as good as she got. "I've been totally cut off from them because their tenets forbid them to look upon an unveiled woman, and my tenets don't permit me to veil," she said, adding off the record that the less clothes on a woman the better. (Hear, hear!)

Gertrude had more things to say, like how these Shi'ites lived in an atmosphere that reeked of antiquity and ignorance and that if she wore a veil it would be an admission of inferiority. (Having

## APPOINTING A WOMAN TO REPRESENT THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN TALKS WITH THE MESOPOTAMIANS WAS TANTAMOUNT TO SENDING LENI RIEFENSTAHL AS THE FIRST GERMAN AMBASSADOR TO ISRAEL.

seen pictures of her, I don't agree. She should have worn a veil, and a very thick one at that.)

Well, we all know the results. Gertrude's and Winston's solution to sweeping away the dust of antiquity was to bring in a foreign king from the Hashemite dynasty, whose family ruled until the Baathists massacred them in 1958. (The last king of Iraq was the first cousin of the king of Jordan, and both families—at least those young ones who survived the massacre by being in school abroad—grieved together in Gstaad later that year.)

Now, with a new century at hand, Uncle Sam is trying to do a Gertrude, but this time the Sunnis aren't buying. The good uncle has it worse than Miss Gertrude. A decade of sanctions has turned Iraq into a nation of criminals, and with the dissolution of the army, there is a gun under every bed. "Is that a gun in your bed or do you like me?" has become a favorite line of lovelorn Iraqis.) In the meantime, politicians like honest Ahmad Chalabi (Judith Miller's last hope for a Pulitzer) debate inside the fortified zone in a manner reminiscent of the Führer's moving around phantom divisions inside the bunker during the closing days of World War II.

And it gets worse. People used to say things will get better when Saddam is captured or when the voting begins. No longer. The whens have run out like Chalabi fleeing the Jordanian fuzz after he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Militias are in control outside the capital, militias that will go to war

with each other as soon as the Marines leave town. It's depressing, it's sad, it's a waste, and it's worse than a crime—with compliments to Talleyrand—it's a mistake. Bush should start telling the truth and face up to the disaster. And the rest of us—except for the neocons with their agenda—should read up on history.

Wilson divided parts of the Ottoman Empire with disastrous results. Churchill in his megalomania insisted in creating a new country, Iraq. It took Tito to keep the peace in Yugoslavia, and Saddam to keep it in Iraq. Sometimes bad guys are good for countries and vice versa. ■

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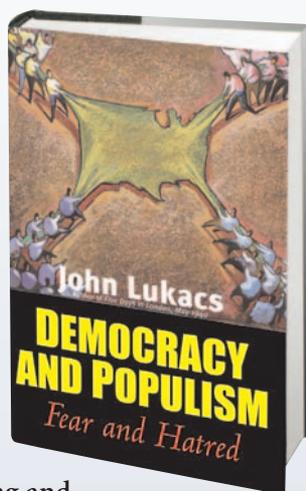
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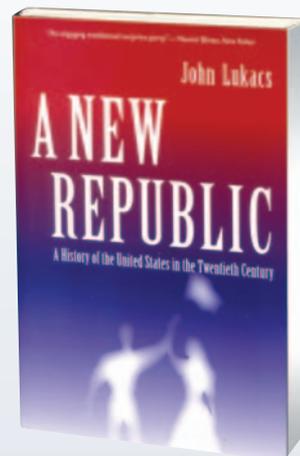
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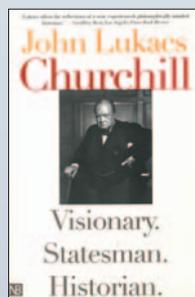
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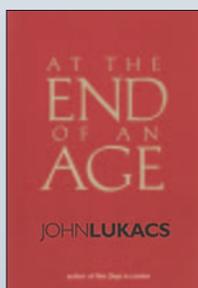
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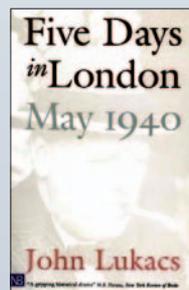
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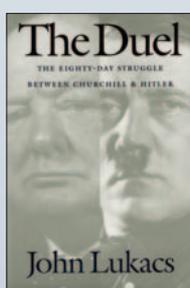
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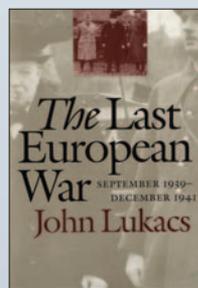
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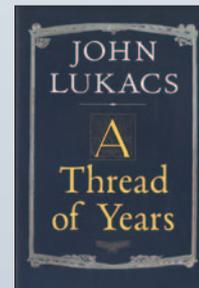
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