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**Remembering Fisk**

The writer, a Chevening scholar, studied International Journalism at the University of Sussex.

Lost in the din of the American elections was major news about the death of Robert Fisk (1946-2020), the legendary British journalist, best-selling author and award-winning foreign correspondent of the ‘Independent’, who served the field of journalism like a true servant and left it greatly enriched.

Fisk’s death represents more than the loss of journalism. It brought an era of excellent reporting on some of the world’s most complicated conflicts to a close. Known for his bold and no-holds-barred views, Fisk wrote on the politics, wars and the so-called ‘nation-building’ missions undertaken by Western governments not only in the Middle East but also in Afghanistan.

Through his best-selling books and syndicated columns, he exposed the lies, half-truths and hypocrisy of the imperial powers and projected the reality of grave human tragedies that these military interventions led to.

For about five decades, starting from the beginning of his journalistic career in 1972 till his death on October 30 this year, the chief concern for Fisk was nothing else but the truth. He belonged to a rare generation of journalists who throw themselves into the thick of the action in conflict zones and report what they see.

It is for this reason that Robert Fisk remained a thorn in the eyes of the ruling Western establishments and political elites. However, he was respected and loved as a friend of the people for the same reason; they found in him a powerful voice that conveyed their aspirations, predicaments and untold stories to the western world.

An important aspect of modern-day imperialism is the management of perceptions and concoction of facts packaged in carefully woven narratives aimed at winning legitimacy and popular support for otherwise dirty wars propelled at the behest of the industrial-military complex.

A careful review of recent military interventions in the Middle East and Afghanistan will show that much of the war effort went into strategizing how to present the war to the international community, domestic audiences in particular. This is when the framing of conflicts in moralistic and religious terms became the norm.

A major chunk of the Western media was reduced to mere instruments amplifying war objectives and echoing the statements and sermons of the leaders without subjecting them to scrutiny, which is otherwise an essential journalistic function.

The emergence of ‘embedded’ journalism truly captures the depth of the journalistic crisis wherein the stories of human rights abuses that critiqued the conduct of wars were dropped in favour of ‘approved’ texts sent by embedded journalists. With a few exceptions, a consensus emerged within the mainstream Western media that the fight against “evil, barbaric and savage” forces was sacrosanct for which it was okay to sacrifice the foundational principles of journalism. After all, they saw nothing wrong with dispending with the much-trumpeted concepts of ethics and professionalism if the question involved was related to national security.

Another standard to measure the contributions of Robert Fisk is to situate his work within the larger framework of ‘alternate facts’ that underline what has popularly come to be known as ‘post-truth’ politics. Coined by the blogger David Roberts in 2010, the term refers to a political culture in which appeals to emotions shape the political debates without any reference to the policy details and efficacy of facts.

Truth, as it exists as an objective reality, has been relegated to the background. What matters, in the post-truth era, is its subjective understanding that people are manipulated into believing. Gone are the days when the truth was searched for as an ethical ideal and leveraged as a shaper of the moral fabric of societies. Lies and deceptions that were once considered anathema are employed with great abandon as part of ‘smart strategy’ and in pursuit of ‘grand objectives’.

The rise of post-truth politics in many countries such as India, US, Brazil, and Australia has been powered by the emergence of social media, fake websites and 24/7 news media accompanied by its highly partisan and the agenda-setting role at the service of big business, the military-industrial complex and more recently exclusive nationalism and populism.

Thanks to its widespread use during the 2016 presidential elections in the US and the Brexit referendum, the term was declared the international word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries.

It is in this context that the work of Robert Fisk in pursuit of facts and truth needs to be analysed. His eye-witness accounts, often with graphic details, of the Persian Gulf War (1990-91), the Afghanistan War (2001-2014) and the Iraq War (2003-2011) ripped apart the smokescreen of lies, deceits and deceptions woven by neo-imperialists around their dirty business.

Robert Fisk’s intense hatred of war was cultivated by his father who taught him that wars were “a great, terrible waste”. His opposition to the war was complemented by his liking for journalism, a calling he, then aged 12, was attracted to when he watched a movie ‘Foreign Correspondent’. He was greatly moved by the line about the protagonist journalist who was described as: “one of the soldiers of the press, one of the little army of historians who are writing history from beside the cannon’s mouth”.

Fisk was originally a passionate reporter, with a keen eye for detail that he combined with his political insight to produce his voluminous work. His analysis of the geopolitics of the Middle East that he undertook while traveling around the region is not only incisive but also holds a mirror to the ‘hotel journalism’ he called the media outlets that relied exclusively on official sources for their stories.

Fisk was critical of the way Western journalists covered Middle Eastern conflicts and expressed his views clearly and candidly. He severely criticized Western journalists in 2005 who reported from the safety of their hotel rooms by relying on the work of “stringers, part-time correspondents who risk their lives to conduct interviews for American or British journalists, and none can contemplate a journey outside the capital without days of preparation unless they ‘embed’ themselves with American or British forces.”

Fisk belongs to the now fast disappearing old-school breed of journalists that believed in being on the field to cover events as they happened in an attempt to make sense of their complexity. He enjoyed a relationship of trust with his readers that won him many friends around the world and gave him extraordinary excess to otherwise inaccessible leaders. These contacts brought him investigative stories including three interviews with Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, reflecting an urge to get to the roots of the stories and happenings.

Robert Fisk inspired many young journalists around the world and imparted the lesson of how journalism has to be practised, a sacred mission to which he remained loyally devoted until the end of his life. To budding journalists, his message was plain and simple: “Tell the story, whatever the consequences”. He wanted them to burn with what he called a “rigorous determination to tell the truth.”

Fisk is certainly from the league of those whose work will continue to define them even after death. He will remain a towering personality in modern journalism for a long time to come. May his soul rest in peace.

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