



Chasing The Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World

Samantha Power

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'Chasing the Flame' tells the life story of a remarkable man. Sergio Vieira de Mello was born in 1948, just as the post-World War II order was taking shape, and died in a terrorist attack on UN Headquarters in Iraq in 2003, just as the battle lines in the 21st century's great struggle were being drawn.

Chasing The Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World Details

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From Reader Review Chasing The Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World for online ebook

Scott says

This book had an extremely powerful impression on me. For one, the life of Sergio Vieira de Mello was an incredible study of philosophy in action and metamorphosis. His ideals for how the UN could be a force for good and positive change, could help people in times of need, could bring together forces that were opposed, and could solve the problems of a not particularly pleasant human civilization are on display. A complex man (who isn't?), his mission and passion for life and peace coupled with his incomparable skills make him a sorely missed presence in our international community today.

This is a must-read for anyone interested in the UN or who, like me, runs a Model UN club (these are not mutually exclusive). It gives meaning to the purpose of the UN in a way that is so hard to define, and equally weighs its strengths, weaknesses, and - ultimately - failings. The whole book felt like a slow-moving train wreck, with Vieira de Mello's death prominently reported, but still managed to outline what is in effect - at least for me - a new charter of ideals and functions for what is a vital institution and forum of and for the United Nations.

Vieira de Mello was chasing the flame, as the title suggests, but I would expect most people who read Samantha Powers' lucid, inexorable prose to see that the flame burns within us all - if we let it.

As a final note, I'd just like to point out that my impression of John Bolton, who was a recess appointment as US ambassador to the UN (why anyone would appoint someone who is anti-UN to the UN is beyond me) as a total asshole was totally vindicated. Well done Powers.

Deborah says

Samantha Power has done her research, digging up minute details and providing a bit of analysis from her experience in this field. de Mello's life is assessed in great detail, often with the summary of his rebellious nature leading to great changes... or falling into UN disasters. I found the latter part of the book most interesting, as Power presents the big missions and how de Mello approached them and how successful the UN's involvement was considered. For those in the humanitarian field, this will be particularly interesting. For those outside of it, this may be eyeopening towards the difficult decisions and participation involved in a response.

CJ Pine says

Wow, an effective/emotional way of absorbing the history of UN missions in Cambodia, Bosnia, East Timor, and Iraq through one life-story. Through the UN, Sergio Vieira de Mello worked his way from humanitarian coordinator to special envoy and discovered the tension of humanitarian aid versus human rights, might vs. right, and the U.S.' relationship to the UN.

S. Power claims that Sergio upheld the importance of dignity in his career. While Sergio clearly respected and inspired the people around him, and emphasized the pride and dignities of nations, I'm not sure if I caught a coherent vision of human dignity or the future of the international system. He modeled international leadership that wasn't afraid to transition to national leadership (East Timor).

Annmarie Matta says

all I can say.. I wish I could meet Sergio. He gave so much to UN and his story has been staying with me for the past few days. I was heartbroken and kept talking about it with some people. It's unfortunate that many people do not know about Sergio.

I gave 4 stars because some chapters were a bit slow but we needed to know information on why Sergio made determinations on a couple of things because of the countries' pasts.

Esther says

Another great book by Samantha Power. As she did with Raphael Lemkin in her first book, she brings the person of Sergio Vieira de Mello to life, while giving the history of an institution - in this book, the UN, while in her first book, the concept of genocide.

In the book we can follow the transformation of Vieira de Mello's approach toward his work as he deals with the facts on the ground in places such as Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, East Timor, and finally Iraq. Power also points out the strengths and limitations of the UN in these contexts. Through these experiences, however, Vieira de Mello became an expert in post-conflict reconstruction, knowledge that he tried to bring to Iraq but which the Americans and British ignored to their own detriment.

The chapter on his death in the 2003 bombing attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad was particularly troubling to read. After giving his whole life to the UN, the institution failed him in his time of need. It was chilling to see how some of the UN staff picked up and continued the functions of the bureaucracy (i.e., phoning in reports to New York) even as he lay dying in the rubble. The only person with a sense of urgency was Larriera, his wife.

Hardy says

Sergio was the son of a Brazilian diplomat, and lived in many different countries as a child. He went to university in Switzerland, and subsequently joined the UN. He worked with refugees in countries like Cambodia and Yugoslavia, and eventually became one of the most powerful people in the UN. He was killed while working in Iraq.

His life story is a useful way to understand how intergovernmental organizations like the UN actually operate. One major theme in the book is the contrast between idealism and reality. At times, Sergio is a philosopher, searching for some insight into human nature that will allow everyone to cooperate. But the real world is full of chaos, and messy solutions are often the only option for the UN.

Although Sergio was clearly loved within the UN (this book was written by a former American ambassador to the UN), it is unclear if Sergio was actually a good person. He got started in the UN through connections more than merit. While working, he was constantly hobnobbing with characters that history has declared "evil", such as the leaders of the Khmer Rouge. He was unfaithful to his wife, but it never seemed to bother him.

Question: what would Sergio have become if it wasn't for the UN?

Sergio seems to be driven by a lust for power and influence more than a desire to change the world. If his father was the owner of a mining company instead of a diplomat, it is very possible that Sergio would have become a successful mining executive, instead of trying "to save the world". Isn't Sergio a similar personality to Eike Batista, but born into a different family?

Perhaps I have read too many biographies about people like Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, who is famous for skillfully "surviving" the tumultuous years of the French Revolution.

Samantha Power uses a vernacular that reminds me of Paula Broadwell's take on David Petraeus.

Julia Rosa says

Chorei a morte do Sérgio como quem chora a morte de um amigo.

Um livro essencial pra pensar o que a ONU precisa mudar (e o que o mundo precisa mudar) pra que funcione como se propôs a funcionar na sua criação.

Matthew Mendenhall says

Power's book is simply not as driven by passion and zeal as "A Problem From Hell" was, but nonetheless, it's a book by Powers so it's a good one. One thing I appreciated about this book was the delving into the contradictions of Sergio's personal life which he really had no issue being public with. His lack of integrity for the expense of pragmatism, and essentially hedonism, reminded me to be prepared to work out tough issues with such people in compassion and non-judgment.

Stop says

Read the STOP SMILING review of *Chasing the Flame*:

A few months ago, a friend invited me to brunch and I declined. My explanation: I needed to finish reading, for review, Samantha Power's new 640-page biography of the late international diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello.

"Sergio... who?" she asked. "You know," I huffed, hoping she'd snap to recall: *Of course! Vieira de Mello! The all-world geopolitical problem-solving badass!* Instead, she said something about pancakes.

She must have had at least heard of him, I thought, so I prompted: "Assassinated United Nations High

Commissioner for Human Rights? Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq? Killed in Baghdad in 2003? Truck bomb?"

Nothing.

Read the complete STOP SMILING review...

Klaudia says

This book is an amazing account of a person that became an inspiration for my future career. If one is interested in international relations, the UN, diplomacy, and the world affairs - this is a must-read.

Beth says

Chasing the Flame examines the role of the UN in world politics through the life of Sergio Viera de Mello, a Brazilian-born official who spent his career in the UN. He started his career there working for the UNHCR in 1969. He served in Bangladesh, Lebanon, Rwanda, Cambodia, East Timor, the Balkans, and Iraq.

In 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon in response to Palestinian attacks in northern Israel, Viera de Mello was serving as the senior political adviser to the UN interim force in Lebanon, located in the southern part of the country. The US, France and Italy sent a multinational force to northern Lebanon, where Yasser Arafat and the PLO were under siege. This force, which was separate from the UN peacekeeping mission, assisted Palestinian fighters in evacuating Beirut and protected Palestinian refugees living on the outskirts of the city. Western forces retreated on September 10.

A few days later the president of Lebanon was assassinated. Israeli-backed Christian militia attacked the Palestinian camps in retaliation, killing more than 700 refugees. In response to the massacres, US Marines were redeployed to Beirut. The Marines offered military backing to the Lebanese army. In October 1983 241 Marines were killed in a terrorist attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut, and by February 1984 Reagan decided to withdraw US forces rather than risk further attacks.

Donald Rumsfeld, who had served as Middle East envoy in Lebanon when the attacks happened, described in 2003 how the "lesson of Lebanon" had shaped his approach to terrorism. Withdrawal had been a mistake because it had shown extremists that "terrorism works." The United States would have to go on the offensive against terrorists. Viera de Mello identified a different lesson from the attacks. He was convinced that the US had made a mistake in siding with the Lebanese army. He had a new appreciation for the importance of UN neutrality in peacekeeping operations.

In 1993, Viera de Mello joined the UN peacekeeping force in Bosnia, whose mandate was to ensure conditions for peace talks, and security in three "safe areas." He believed that a political solution was the responsibility of major powers and advocated UN neutrality. He opposed a NATO bombing campaign, arguing that unless NATO was willing to intervene with a ground force, the peacekeeping mission should not

be asked to accept the risks that came from offensive air strikes. Power argues that the UN mission's traditional approach to peacekeeping was not appropriate to the circumstances.

She shows how Viera de Mello later realized the limitations of that approach. When Serbia massacred the "safe area" of Srebrenica in July 1995, UN peacekeepers were removed from Serb territory to accommodate NATO air strikes, and this time Viera de Mello supported NATO's intervention. When Serbia attacked the province of Kosovo, Viera de Mello gathered evidence of ethnic cleansing against the Kosovars. His findings drew greater media attention to the situation, and led to Milosevic's indictment by the Hague, the first time a sitting head of state had ever been indicted by an international tribunal.

Viera de Mello worried about the precedent that the NATO intervention had set for unilateral intervention, but he was persuaded that the UN's credibility would have suffered if there had been no intervention after Srebrenica. He came to see the UN's intervention as illegal under the UN Charter but legitimate according to the UN's ideals.

Vieira de Mello was sent to Baghdad in 2003 to lead the UN mission in Iraq. Like most UN officials, he had opposed the invasion. However, he thought that the UN could make a difference in the reconstruction of Iraq. He advocated a concrete timetable with an end date for the occupation. His mission was distrusted and marginalized by L. Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority, but that did not prevent Al Qaeda in Iraq from making the United Nations one of its first civilian targets.

In her conclusion, Power writes that Viera de Mello's insistence on "talking to everyone" sometimes led to lapses in judgment, as in Bosnia when he showed excessive deference to Serbian leaders Karadzic and Milosevic. The massacre in Srebrenica and the genocide in Rwanda convinced him to speak up more about matters of principle, although he continued to engage with perpetrators of atrocities when and extracted concessions when possible. In 2000 he embraced a new norm of intervention proposed by an independent commission: the international community's "Responsibility to Protect" civilian populations against genocide and ethnic cleansing when governments proved unwilling. When he took up his position as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, he had a greater appreciation of the role of human rights in world politics. To preserve global order, human rights standards would have to become more binding. During his time in Iraq he placed increasing importance on human rights as central to the country's future.

Here is a good review at Corrente Wire
http://www.correntewire.com/book_revi...

Diogo Alcantara says

A must read, definitely! Samantha Power makes an important tribute to Sergio with her precision, accuracy, transparency, research, and writing style. Besides her admiration for him, Power doesn't hide or minimize any of the controversial step or decisions made by Sergio, but in an objective way she presents his essence of a passionate UN worker aware of and guided by his mission.

PS: the title of the book could be better...

Ashley Clark says

"Hey Girl. What you readin? Why you cryin?" says the man sitting on the hood of his car to me.
"Just a book about the UN," I say as I walk briskly home.

When this book started, I could not control my eye-rolls. I have read a few books about aggrandized heroes who often forget that their being male allows them to act in ways that would be intolerable in the opposite sex. And, don't get me wrong- Sergio does this. Samantha Power does not shy away from his less savory side: the neglect of his children, his multiple trysts, and his very awkward "promotion" of women. That said, this book won me over a thousand times. It did not win me over bc I left it thinking "Sergio is the best!" What Samantha Power does, and is so extraordinary, is uses the life of the man to chart not only his changes, but the UN's changes, and where the UN and Sergio, sometimes separately and sometimes together, succeeded and failed.

Now, why did I cry? Well, not-so-spoiler alert: Sergio dies in Iraq. I knew this before I picked up the book, as he is a hero in Timor (they even have an award named after him). It also tells you that I think in the first line of the book. But then when you get to the tragedy of the suicide bomb that took the lives of 19 UN personnel, I couldn't help it. Power weaves together all stories of those there, from the US firefighter who couldn't help because he had 9/11 flashbacks to the fiancee of Sergio desperately trying to get soldiers' attentions. The twenty or so pages that describe the incident are utterly heartbreakin.

That said, this book is a GREAT read for anyone interested in the following:

1. Overviews of crises that the UN handled in the past 40 years, including Vietnamese "boat people," Cambodian elections, returning of refugees and genocidaires from the Congo to Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and Iraq.
2. People interested in the UN system
3. Anyone who cares about humanitarian efforts and/or human rights
4. Anyone who has worked abroad, or wants to work abroad
5. Americans

Ok, since that covers most of my five friends on Goodreads, that is my way of saying everybody should read it. Done.

Kelly says

Sergio Vieira de Mello was undoubtedly an interesting person who drew a wide range of people (including Samantha Power) into his orbit over the years he worked for the UN in places like Kosovo, East Timor, and Iraq. I expected the book to embody more of the charisma and intelligence and warmth that the man must have had, to bring this larger-than-life figure right into the room with the reader. It mostly failed in that regard, feeling dry and academic, especially for the first half. It picks up considerably once he gets to East Timor, but still, perhaps because Power could not go to Vieira de Mello himself but had to rely on past interviews and the recollections of others, along with the usual documents, to research her story, it lacks his presence.

Power also claims that Vieira de Mello's personal growth as a representative of the UN can serve as a blueprint for future diplomacy and crisis management. I'm not totally convinced. The big lessons are things like "Legitimacy matters," and "Security is the first priority," which are definitely lessons Sergio learned but it also seems like even as he learned them, his ability to apply them was severely hampered by the politics of the Security Council and the bureaucracy of the rest of the UN. Will the countries on the Security Council

overcome their individual obsessions long enough to learn these lessons in future crises? I'm not holding my breath.

Then, too, Vieira de Mello believed in engaging all parties, including terrorist leaders, warlords, and even the American government. Power understands that this often led him into morally compromised positions, or the appearance of such (which could be equally damaging), but claims that he learned this lesson, too, and became more outspoken throughout his career. He never got to finish his work in Iraq, so maybe we could have learned something there, but I don't see much guidance in his behavior as to how to engage the "bad guys" enough to keep them in the process and maybe make some improvements, while still knowing when and how to stand up to them, take sides, and even use force. I suppose there's no rulebook for this, but I think Power overstates her claim to have extracted principles from Vieira de Mello's career.

I got into the book, for sure, as it gave a nice peek into life in the field for UN officials, but I never quite got what the purpose of the book was, as it didn't seem complete as either biography or analysis.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Samantha Power, a professor at Harvard, met Sergio Vieira de Mello when she was a journalist in Bosnia in 1994. Although he charmed her as he did everyone else, she has written a balanced biography of the flawed but dedicated and likable man. While Power impressed the critics with her research, she failed to convince all of them of her arguments. Several reviewers also noted that Power's writing, laden with detail and subtle layering, doesn't rise to the level of her Pulitzer Prize
