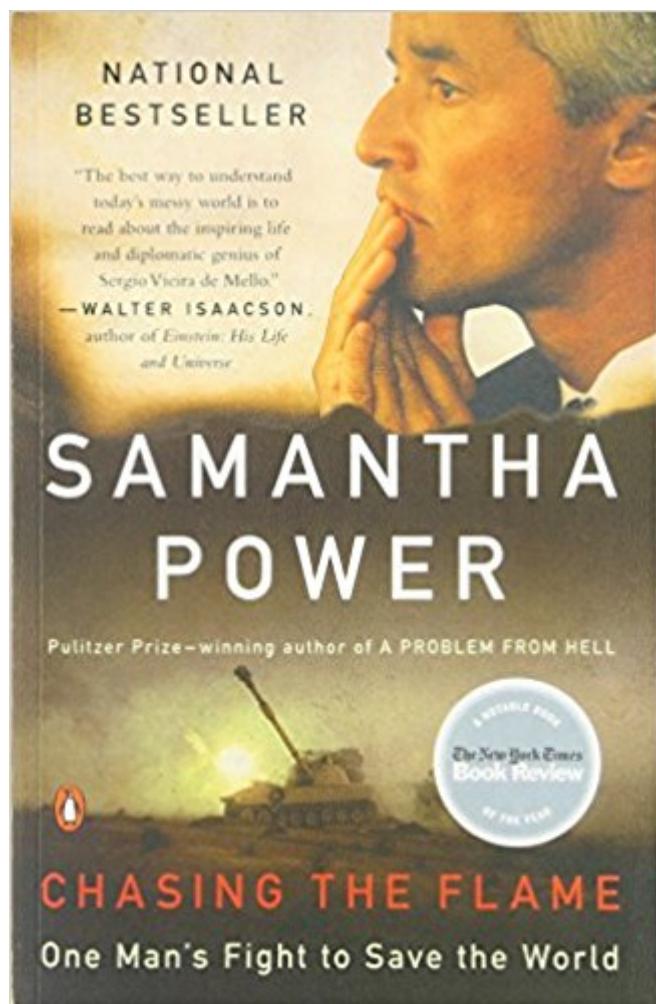


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Chasing The Flame: One Man's Fight To Save The World



Synopsis

In this perfect match of author and subject, Pulitzer Prize-winner Samantha Power tackles the life of Sergio Vieira de Mello, whose work for the U.N. before his 2003 death in Iraq was emblematic of moral struggle on the global stage. Power has drawn on a staggering breadth of research (including 400 interviews) to show us a heroic figure and the conflicts he waded into, from Cambodia's Khmer Rouge to the slaughter in Bosnia to the war-torn Middle East. The result is a peerless portrait of humanity and pragmatism, as well as a history of our convulsive age.

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Customer Reviews

The death of the charismatic Brazilian chief of the U.N. Mission to Iraq in a 2003 terrorist bombing symbolized both the U.N.'s haplessness—he died because rescuers lacked the training and equipment to free him from the rubble—and its idealism. In this sprawling biography, Vieira de Mello's life symbolizes the tragic contradictions of coping with humanitarian crises. Journalist Power, author of the Pulitzer-winning *The Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, follows Vieira de Mello through a U.N. career spent in hot spots like Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo. His tasks were many: implementing peace accords, settling refugees, overseeing elections, running the government of East Timor. In each posting, he confronts a hydra-headed monster of communal violence and poverty, plus difficulties compounded by U.N. red tape, miserly budgets and uncaring Western governments. Agonizing dilemmas abound. Should refugees be fed or sent home? Should U.N. peacekeepers observe or intervene? Should past atrocities be

prosecuted or overlooked? Playing by ear, Vieira de Mello charts an erratic course through these conundrums. Sometimes he's a human rights zealot, sometimes he cozies up to the Khmer Rouge; sometimes he negotiates with the Serbs, sometimes he wants to bomb them. Vieira de Mello comes off as a charming diplomat, a canny politician and an inspiring leader, and the author celebrates his flexibility and pragmatism (while criticizing his failures). Power wants to extract lasting lessons for the international community's efforts to head off humanitarian catastrophes and mend failed states from his experience. Unfortunately, it's hard to discern through his improvisations any systematic approach to nation building or to such vexed issues as humanitarian military intervention and regime change. The lack of perspective isn't helped by the biographical format, as the peripatetic Vieira de Mello jets from one conflagration to the next, then on to a romantic getaway with a mistress or to give a murky speech on Kant. We get the impression that U.N. missions are inevitably a hopeless muddle unless Sergio, with his unique talents, parachutes in to fix things; the book may thus inadvertently encourage critics of the U.N.-style interventionism that Power supports. Readers will gain an appreciation of Vieira de Mello's gifts, but not the method to his magic. B&w photos. (Mar. 6)

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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-winning *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (2002) until the very end, when she recounts Vieira de Mello's last moments. As much a critique of the United Nations and its policies as the story of a man battling injustice, *Chasing the Flame*, despite being cited as a somewhat slow read, is a significant contribution to our understanding of global affairs and the future of peacekeeping. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Brilliantly written, with a title that beautifully reflects the thrust of the book, it draws a spell-binding portrait of an idealist, dedicated to his work and the goals of the UN. At the same time, it depicts with deep compassion a very human person, highly likeable in spite of the flaws. The last chapter, reporting the details of his tragic death, makes for a harrowing read, high drama that will bring tears

in the reader's eyes - including tears of frustration, because with a little better organization, his life might have been saved. Yet, it could be argued that the real value of this book lies in another direction, it zeroes in on a phenomenon I have often come across in my 25 years of work at the UN: the rise of a new class of bureaucrats, far from the stereotype we all think of when the word "bureaucrat" comes up. Vieira de Mello, a Brazilian, was a true cosmopolitan, a man who lived beyond any nationalistic allegiance (though he loved his home country) and who truly believed in the supremacy of human rights, as defined in the UN Charter and the Declaration. Here is no bureaucrat attached to red tape and looking forward to week-end partying. Here is a man who worked incessantly, often putting work before family. I can vouch that there are many more like him in the UN system, people who honestly believe that the world should move beyond nationalism if it is ever to achieve peace and prosperity. Such people are "civil servants" in the most basic sense of the term, i.e. serving Society with a capital "s", and Samantha Power reveals in this book exactly how such people come about, what pushes them, what inspires them and frustrates them, in short, how they act and why. To anyone wondering how and why the UN continues to survive the violent attacks against it, including skepticism about its continued relevance, here is the beginning of an answer: the resilience of the UN system lies largely in the quality of (some) of its staff - people like Vieira de Mello. The insights "Chasing the Flame" provides into this little known aspect of the UN is what makes this book particularly important and a must read.

Great book. Didn't know what to expect. Samantha Power's shows us an incredible individual and teaches us a thing or two about the state of the world and how things are really dealt with.

A great man that is going to be missed for many years!

This book is highly recommended, to anyone with an interest in international affairs. It's a tremendous work of research on Power's part to convey so much detail of de Mello's life and achievements, in some cases of operations / conversations dating from more than two decades past. The style is uber accessible, exactly right for the subject, and indeed reads like a 500+ page New Yorker article, unsurprisingly given Power's journalistic background and that (possibly) the first public outing of some of this material was in an article in that magazine in January 2008 ("The Envoy"). There is a sadness that envelops the book, of course, which is that everyone knows the denouement before picking it up for the first time, making it both a study of leadership and achievement, and also of tragically wasted opportunity. We are left wondering not just whether he

would have been Secretary General one day, but what kind of Secretary General would he have made? Would he have carried on trying to avoid making enemies? Where would that have taken him? Would he have made a better one than Annan, who to me ends the book still slightly inaccessible, ephemeral, as if he didn't really make himself or his insights available to Power, or couldn't bear to, even now. The other source of sadness of course comes from his life being cut short with so many important loose ends unsecured. The absence of goodbyes, the strong sense of it being the wrong woman on the Brazilian air force jet, there being no shoulder being colder than the one of the UN bureaucracy, that only flew his partner Larriera as far as Buenos Aires because that's what the rules allowed. A final poignant image of Larriera and de Mello's mother celebrating the end of Annan's tenure with a bottle of champagne, something a reader feels the de Mello of the previous 500 pages would never have wanted to see in a million years, and proof of the mess that violent and sudden death can trail in its wake. It's an important study on many levels, not least because humanitarianism has always been about leadership. From Dunant onwards, it's a story of exceptional individuals achieving exceptional things in the face of exceptional adversity, even other people's. The world's tragedy is that there aren't enough de Mello's, and they don't come around often enough. For every de Mello or Jan Egeland, there seems to come along a Kenzo Oshima or a John Holmes, well-motivated and ultimately invisible, into whose well-intentioned blandness the world's conscience is allowed to hide. And if you need a new hero, look no further than Gil Loescher, the sole survivor who was in de Mello's office at the time of the blast, and the "tutorials about resilience" that he talks of having derived from the refugees to which he has devoted his career. May your "second life" be a beautiful, a long and a productive one, good sir.

Well written insightful record of a vigorous UN official who believed in the charter and the role of the UN in the tough spots of the world.

I had the privilege to meet the man and I think Miss Power Captures his soul, which was not easily. Or the period in history where live and work.

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