

THE WAY OF THE WORLD



A STORY OF TRUTH AND HOPE
IN AN AGE OF EXTREMISM

RON SUSKIND

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism

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This is an original and devastating look at the post-9/11 world from one of America's most incisive and insightful political commentators. It explores how America and the West lost their way as well as the struggles of their respective governments to reclaim the moral authority on which their survival demands.

The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism Details

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From Reader Review The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism for online ebook

Bea Alden says

It took me a while to get through this book, because I kept turning aside into the world of fiction. This is a heavy, heavy book, exploring the internal world of the Bush coterie as they manipulated information and public opinion to justify the invasion of Iraq. Lots of background information including descriptions of conversations with significant people involved with the CIA, sensitive international Muslim figures, and so forth. Altogether it's a bleak picture. Made me wonder why the subtitle: "A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism?"

The only fragments of hope are found in the very last chapter. Suskind writes, ominously prefacing his declaration of hopefulness; "These two great genies of wish fulfilment -- messianic fervor and technological power -- have spotted each other. If they come together, the world, as it is now known, will no longer exist." But next, we find: "Standing firmly in their way is a small community that has been experimenting with the idea that disparate people can, and must, understand one another.....when people are tested..they often manage to discover saving truths...When the world works... it's because everyone moves forward, in a kind of modest unison...It is...making sure everyone advances, even if it's just one step...it's about common people coming to the shores of a vast, challenging place, discovering their truest potential, and re-creating, over and over, a new world....It's about the valley rising."

Paul says

This book was not entirely what I expected. Though there was the political content I had heard about--including reports about fabricated intelligence concerning Iraq--there were other stories about individuals who were not in the political arena and they were very interesting. There was also information about Benazir Bhutto which was enlightening as to the events leading up to her assassination. Overall this was a very interesting read--though incredibly maddening at times when talking about the failures of the outgoing administration. Recommended reading.

Stephanie says

so, to quote another reader

grief, shame, anger, fear, embarrassment, sadness, helplessness. The Way of the World ultimately is a story of greed and incompetence in and around the White House and betrayal and cowardice by the people who work for the man who lives there.

that tells the tale, and yet I feel totally different about this than I did a week ago. What could POSSIBLY have made that happen? Oh, right, the election!

Suddenly I have hope. This book was so depressing, and now I am ecstatic that Bush is leaving. Hey, Georgie, don't let the White House door hit you in the ass on the way out. As David Letterman asked "I am sure I am not alone in this, or am I the only one who thinks it would be a good thing if he left early, like now?"

It is a fascinating book, and the stories about the people! When Usman Khosa was detained on the streets of DC, I nearly lost it. And the struggle of Ibrahim Frotan as he tried to live with a host family in Colorado after coming from Afghanistan just broke my heart.

Should be required reading for people who want to vote. Oh but wait, we won!

Deirdre says

Many think it's not a matter of "if" but really a matter of "when." When will there be a radioactive explosion in a US city? According to the experts Suskind knows, the attack could either be a so-called dirty bomb or a nuclear weapon cobbled together by gathering highly enriched uranium purchased from various suppliers on the underground market. The fact that screams through the book is that the US is not doing enough to prevent this from happening.

But the question is: Doing enough of what?

Some, like Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, former CIA agent and present Director of the office of intelligence and counterintelligence at the Department of Energy, swing from wanting to operate within the slow-moving government bureaucracy to going commando. He dreams of gathering a team of operatives to buy the stuff, smuggle it into the country, and reveal the weakness of the system. His frustration is that the US is not building up its intelligence sources and employing cold-war-type cloak-and-dagger tactics.

Then there is the struggle to win over the world population to the idea that the US is a benevolent force, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Here Suskind follows the lives of several young men, one, Ibrahim Frotan a whip-smart exchange student from Afghanistan, the other Usman Khosa, an forward-thinking professional from Pakistan living in Washington DC. Usman is walking by the White House one morning, listening to his iPod, when he is busted by the Secret Service. He is interrogated in a basement and finally released. It all started because he looked like a "terrorist type." His crisis emerges when he no longer believes that he can fit into US society or Pakistani society. Ibrahim struggles to adjust to the vast difference between Afghan village culture and the mainstream US culture he is plopped into.

While neither interaction is clean, Suskind ends both stories by suggesting that the antidote to their crises is to respect individual rights, a concept developed in the western Bourgeois thinking. Individual rights are the key to the struggle of a Guantanamo prisoner, Abdul al-Ghizzawi, to escape his unlawful imprisonment.

Not a bad idea. And it works in peer-to-peer relations and occasionally in US courts, but individual rights are not necessary the most important concept for a large sector of the world's population. Individual rights are only important if everyone has enough food, shelter, and a safe environment where they can prosper. So in the struggle to win over the "hearts and minds" of the world's people in general and groups that may be able to counter the kinds of devastating attacks that Rolf Mowatt-Larssen most fears and that al Qaeda has already carried out, are they the correct basis? It seems that Suskind is advocating not meeting people where they are, where religion or government or region or tribe is the most important entity, but where western thinking is at.

Perhaps the solution to the dilemma is more basic. Pull back US military bases. End the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Provide actual humanitarian aid without manipulation. Stop exploiting poorer countries for their natural resources. Stop trying to impose the "free market" on the world. Politically disarm those who argue that the US the main perpetrator of terror. Cut the military budget and so on.

Suskind's book is informative and well-written, but I don't think he actually accepts that the US shouldn't control The Way of the World.

Ric says

Ron Suskind's book explores the concern of the nuclear threat to American, but this is not your mom and dad's fear of the Soviet Union's missiles, but renegade Soviet Union uranium. Suskind's book is very humanistic, and that side of the novel turned out to be the highlight for me. More startling are Suskind's revelations about the Iraq war and the handling of prewar intelligence regarding weapons of mass destruction. In one instance, Suskind says that denials by the foreign minister of Iraq, Naji Sabri, that his country possessed WMD were simply rewritten - "almost certainly altered under pressure from Washington," Suskind writes - into a false assertion that Sabri had substantiated suspicions about active Iraqi biological and nuclear programs. I also was disheartened when we follow Benazir Bhutto through the final months leading to her assassination in December, as she pleads in vain with the Bush administration to provide her with more support in her fight for democracy in Pakistan. What really did the Bush Administration mean when they said they were fighting for Democracy in the world of terrorism? The smoking gun is a supposed CIA letter written on white house stationery that was ordered by the White House that was supposed to be written by former Iraqi intelligence chief named Tahir Jalil Habbush. Altogether I liked The Way of the World for the humanistic voices it adds throughout the book.

Chris says

This is the first book I've read in almost a year. (Shame on me!)

Suskind is an excellent writer and storyteller, so whether you agree with him or not, it is a good read. He explores the United States' place in the world since 9-11 by following different people affected, from an Afghani exchange student, intelligence officials, a lawyer representing a Guantanamo detainee, Benazir Bhutto, and a Pakistani grad student in Washington. He hops around a lot and keeps introducing new people all through the book, which could be confusing but largely isn't in this case.

Suskind's main thesis is that for the United States to reclaim its place as the leading power in the world it needs to reconfirm its adherence to its values of being an open society that cherishes and protects the human rights on which it was founded. The Bush/Cheney doctrine of operating in the "Dark Side," where we try to exert our will through brute force and torture and ignoring our Constitution has been a flop.

Zach says

First off this book is not exactly what one may expect.

It is not the same forum as Suskind's earlier One Percent Doctrine or Bob Woodward's Bush trilogy. Suskind does offer in depth examination of the high level discussion/tactics regarding the WMD intel during the run-up to OIF. But this is only one part of the book. Suskind attempts to create a much more complex story by multi-layering several stories (an Afghani exchange student, a Pakistani working a white collar job in DC, the lawyer of a Gitmo detainee, and a former CIA official desperately attempting to draw attention to the need to stop nuclear smuggling). The result is a much more complex theme about the differing perspectives on the war on terror and the war in Iraq.

Suskind's views of President Bush are clear (in the first chapter he repeatedly refers to him as a bully) and his views of the Bush administration's tactics/policies are also clear, but his overall narrative is somewhat balanced, acknowledging both the causes of terror as well as the need to defend against it.

The last quarter of the book is much more like the One Percent Doctrine, where Suskind argues that the Bush administration not only knew there was no WMD in Iraq but actively attempt to obfuscate the truth and enlisted the CIA in active disinformation effort against the US, including using a high level Iraqi defector (who supposedly had credible evidence that there was no WMD to falsify documents indicating an Iraq-9/11 connection). These are interesting points and Suskind does a decent job of raising the argument, but many may find these accusations are not fully developed and charges this serious should be presented earlier in the book with a lot more supporting documentation.

Overall though, an interesting and highly readable book.

Ryan says

I hadn't heard of *The Way of the World*, but found it to be a fairly comprehensive picture of the current national security status, specifically regarding weapons of mass destruction. He jumps between George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Benazir Bhutto, an Afghani exchange student, a Pakistani professional emigre, a Blackwater expert on loose nukes, a lawyer for a detainee in Guantanamo, intelligence officials, and lots of anonymous sources. All of their stories, together, make up a compelling picture of what extremists are trying to do to blow up the Western world, what the West is trying to do to stop them, and the very grey middle ground. From private undercover teams that try to test our detection systems in buying weapons grade nuclear material and trying to get it into the country to what the detainees at Guantanamo were doing before they were captured, from conservative Islamic family culture to modern Islamic family culture, from George Bush's approach to fighting terrorism to the rest of the world's, from the willingness of the globe to help stop terrorism before we invaded Iraq to the difficulty and loss of moral leadership we encounter now - it's a very sweeping book. I was impressed - and not just because I found out a lot more about a friend of mine who I had no idea was a big focus of such a sweeping book (hint: it's not George W. Bush).

Melissa says

Absolutely the best, read this book. In one chapter, you read about a very conservative Afghani exchange student, conflicted over his pleasurable discovery of porn on the internet in CO, in the next, you learn all of the details behind the fabricated justifications of our war in Iraq and then the story of Butto's return to Pakistan, and then some shitty stories about the pathetic evidence against detainees at Gitmo, etc. But then the vignettes are continued throughout the book and there are people out there working to free the detainees, change the rules, work to create bridges with fundamentalists and spread the pure and good concepts behind patriotism and American ideals. And then the Afghani boy falls for a teenage mother that would have been stoned to death in his country, all very fascinating and inspiring.

Mark says

An interesting narrative about how America has lost its moral high ground. So true. Mr Suskind illustrates how and what we have lost by telling stories; the stories of people confronted with making moral choices

affecting America in large and small ways.

He builds compelling arguments on two points. First, telling the truth is a powerful force for good. Second, we are all in this together today, in ways that were not imaginable before mass communications and technology empowered individuals to deliver messages on a global scale.

Ben says

This is the first Suskind book I've read, but certainly not the last. I was struck by how beautifully written the book is. I thought I would be reading a polemic on nuclear weapon proliferation, which in some part it is. But that is only one small portion of the book. Really it is closer to a book like *Lexus and the Olive Tree* or *The World is Flat*; it is an open discussion on how the Muslim world and the West interface.

The best sections of the book are about a Pakistani American finding his way through his dual identity, a rural Afghan teenager coming to America and a lawyer working with her client in Guantanamo. Suskind does a great job of painting a complex portrait of each person, and how international politics weaves through each person's lives.

The sections on how we knew that Saddam did not have WMDs before the Iraq war were good, though a little stale now that he is out of the office (or perhaps I just have Bush Bashing Fatigue at this point). The sections about nuclear non-proliferation felt a little slim, and by the end I had lost interest in Suskind's views on it. But overall this is a book worth reading if you are interested in how Bush's politics makes us less safe.

Benjy says

The Way of the World has some interesting stuff about the Bush administration's deceptions around the Iraq war, but those parts are buried in a sea of mushy personal narratives of private individuals impacted by the 'war on terror'. The point of all these stories is, I think, to show that the only way for the US to win an ideological struggle is to live up to its own ideology. Which is a good point, but could have been made far more succinctly.

Individual stories can be a compelling way to illustrate a universal thesis. But that thesis must still be established with facts. This book, however, contains few facts: no numbers, no statistics, no trends, just a collection of anecdotes, and even those must be taken on faith, since Suskind provides no explanation of how he knows the details of these private meetings, clandestine conversations and inner monologues.

Like that other quintessential Washington insider, Thomas Friedman, Suskind believes that we should take his anecdotes at face value, even when he offers no proof of their veracity and no wider context in which to place them.

Meh.

Len says

An excellent bit of journalism by Ron Suskind. I really love the way he tells a story -- with each "character" a part of a larger story of the problems with America's war on terrorism. We see the story through the eyes of a wide range of people, from a young Pakistani in America and a Afghan exchange student to people at high levels of U.S. and British government.

The book pretty much confirms that we went to war in Iraq under false pretenses, but it does so with firsthand accounts of actions (and inactions) of the Bush administration. It really lays a lot of the blame directly on the vice president.

But what makes the book great is that it gives us a way out, or at least a way to explore how we move on from where we are. In a nutshell, Suskind's thesis is that we open up dialogues at all levels with every group and build person-to-person relationships across difficult lines. This thesis rings true for the majority of the people in the book, including people in the U.S. and British intelligence community who have essentially had their eyes opened by the results of our failed policies on terrorism.

There is no clear answer to how the world addresses terrorism, but at least Suskind gives us something to believe in.

Seán says

You should read it, but there's a "but."

In this otherwise very sensible and superbly written call for restoring America's moral authority in the world, the only annoying flaw is Suskind's boy-crush/blindspot for Blackwater and other "can-do" mercenary groups. Yes, government's ability to conduct covert, in-country operations and other such activities has largely been lost to the private sector over the last thirty-five years. However, this unfortunate state of affairs has not been brought about by simple negligence--certain people in government long ago realized: (1) corporations can more easily conduct operations outside the law; and (2) the profits to well-placed friends are enormous, practically limitless. So let's not pretend Blackwater and Company will serve as allies in a campaign to rebuild America's reputation and moral standing. They've got shareholders to keep happy and Congresspeople to grease.

STILL, read it for the insight on Bhutto's last days and the Affair de Habbush (which should be included in a federal indictment that will never happen).

Jennifer Abdo says

Two shows/interviews:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/st...>

<http://www.democracynow.org/2008/8/13...>

My thoughts:

Wow. Bush should have been impeached. He and his admin did in fact break the law. It was bad that they

lied in the run up to Iraq (not illegal necessarily, unfortunately), but forging a letter from an Iraqi official "confirming" their list of lies in a covert action to alter public opinion tipped the scale. Ironically, the guy they wanted to copy the info in his own handwriting and sign it was the Iraqi intel guy who confirmed other reports from British intel and our own agencies that Iraq had no WMD (months before the invasion). He and those who reported this were ignored by Bush and only "used" when they wanted him to copy down this fabricated (by the White House) letter and have it planted in Baghdad by CIA. Of course their outing of him (with a total lie only to save them some shame and from having to come clean) would put him and his family in danger, being collaborators and all, but hey, when has that ever mattered with Bush admin officials? Plame, anyone?

The book starts out with personal stories of a handful of people and how they experienced America or its decline in those 8 years. I was really enjoying that, then the second part really dove into 9/11, the run up to Iraq, Guantanamo, Bhutto's death and the admin's mishandling (to put it mildly) of it all (every last bit). We had the sympathy of the world after 9/11 and blew it. The British opened back channels in Iraq and then Iran to get solid intel and future negotiations started and we slammed the door because they wouldn't fall in line with our assumptions of WMD, etc.

When the story abruptly changed from personal stories to Bush admin stuff (I've about had enough) I was tempted to stop reading, but it actually was tied together quite nicely in the end. I think it was a bad decision to not fully investigate everything to find out who knew what and when and put it out for all eyes. Only then can apologies and amends be made and perhaps our reputation restored. We can and I hope we do repair our image by doing the right thing, but apologies and admissions of guilt (taking responsibility) are always a solid, healthy way to go.

I fully agree with the sentiment in the book that America needs to get back its moral authority -honesty, compassion, respect for others- and stop imposing our will on others. Giving without leaving the recipient in our debt. Bush was not a leader that helped us build on these principles. He destroyed them. Obama has had to start from scratch- or a negative position.
