

Part One

A Critique of Impure Reason

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CHAPTER 1

DO-GOODERS GONE BAD

All reformers are bachelors.

—George Moore

It is a shame that the world improvers don't set off some signal before they go bad, like a fire alarm that is running out of juice. Maybe some adjustment could be made. Instead, the most successful of them—such as Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler—actually gain market share as they get worse. Their delusions are self-reinforcing, like the delusions of a stock market bubble; the higher prices go, the more people come to believe they make sense.

The do-gooders who never catch on, of course, are hopeless from the get-go. Take poor Armin Meiwes. The man thought he had a solution to the problems of poverty and overpopulation. He was, no doubt, discussing his program with Bernard Brandes just before the two cut off Brandes' most private part and ate it. Then, wouldn't you know it, Brandes died, either as a result of blood loss from the butchering or as a consequence of Meiwes slitting his throat. And then the press made a big stink about it, branding Meiwes the "Cannibal of Rotenburg." But Meiwes was not merely a pervert; he was an activist.

"We could solve the problem of overpopulation and famine at a stroke," said he, according to testimony in the *Times of London*. "The third world is really ripe for eating." But wait, a fellow omnivore thought he saw a flaw in Meiwes' utopia: "If we make cannibalism into the norm, then everyone will start eating each other and there

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will be nobody left.” “That’s why I’m not keen on eating women,” replied Meiwes.¹

It seems never to have occurred to either of them that just *perhaps* not everyone would want to be eaten. Or that maybe people would find being eaten even less desirable than having to stand in line or drive around looking for a parking space or the other symptoms of what they took to be planetary overcrowding. Still, anthropophagy might have solved the problems of overpopulation and undernourishment in a single slice. And if his recipe for planetary improvement had not been interrupted by the *polizei*, who knows what might have happened?

But now the poor fellow is in the hoosegow making do with hamburger. The same thing happened to another of the world’s do-gooders gone bad, Saddam Hussein. We don’t know much about the Butcher of Baghdad, but his defense was little different from that of all ex-dictators—he thought he was building a better world. Iraq is, after all, a wild and wacky place, with different tribes and religious groups ready to cut each other’s throats. At least that was Saddam’s story. Without his firm leadership, he claimed, the country would have been a mess. We think of another great world improver, Il Duce, a clown who thrashed around in typical do-gooder claptrap, looking for a theme that would bring him to power. When he finally got into office, he found a new program better suited to his ambitions: Put on silly uniforms. Strut around telling the masses that you’re recreating the glory of ancient Rome. Spend a lot of money. So many people came to admire the man that he began to think himself admirable and to believe that his program might actually work as advertised. Then, he invaded Abyssinia . . . and the bull market in Benito Mussolini was over.

BLUE BLOODS IN BLACK SHIRTS

But while Mussolini’s star was on the rise, it claimed some strange followers. One of the strangest was carried away, with thousands of

other old people, in the unusually long, hot summer of 2003—Diana Mitford. She was the woman who married Oswald Mosley, and at their wedding in 1936 were some of the most important people of the age, notably Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels.²

Of all the stupidities into which a man can fall, the stupidity that Oswald Mosley launched headlong into was one that was especially vile. With money supplied by Mussolini, he organized Britain's "Blackshirts," an organization much like the Nazis in Germany. National Socialism was supposed to be the wave of the future, but Mosley's group couldn't seem to come up with anything more original than going into London's East End and beating up Jews. Most Englishmen were appalled. When World War II broke out, the Mosleys were interned as security risks. Though they were set free after the war was over, they were told to get out of town. They then joined their best friends, the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh, in France, where they lived out their remaining days. Diana herself lasted into her 90s.

Diana was not only smart; she was among the world's great beauties. She was said to be the prettiest of the Mitford sisters, which was tough competition, and even in her 90s, she posed for *Vogue* magazine and she still looked good. She was "the most divine adolescent I have ever beheld: a goddess, more immaculate, more perfect, more celestial than Botticelli's sea-borne Venus," wrote a friend.³

Really, it is almost too bad she wasn't dumb. She might have glided through life and been a joy to all who saw her. Instead, she married badly . . . which is to say, she fell in love with Mosley, who was an idiot, and threw her lot in with him. Later, British counterespionage agents came to see her as the greater threat. "The real public danger is her," said a report. "She is much more intelligent and more dangerous than her husband."⁴

Of course, she was not the only one of the Mitford sisters to go bad. They were almost all too smart for their own good. Their synapses fired right, left, and overtime . . . and took them in strange directions. Sister Unity, like Diana, took up with the Nazis. Sister Jessica took an equally radical course, but in a different direction; she became a Marxist. It seems as though a smart person will go

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along with almost anything, no matter how preposterous. “I don’t understand,” said Lord Redesdale, father of the Mitford girls. “I am normal, my wife is normal, but my daughters are each more foolish than the other.”⁵

While Hitler was praising Diana and Unity as “perfect specimens of Aryan womanhood,” the other sister, Jessica, known in the family as Decca, was plotting to buy a handgun with which to kill the Führer. But it was Unity who actually used a pistol—on herself. She shot herself in the head and died in 1948. What had become of the sweet little girls raised in Swinbrook? How could normal people produce such extraordinary characters? How could such divine little angels turn mad?

We have no ready answer. But a friend tells us of a book by Riccardo Orizio, an Italian journalist, who hunted down and interviewed former dictators. Dead ones, of course, did no talking, but a surprising number seem to remain among the quick. His book, *Talk of the Devil: Encounters with Seven Dictators*, includes conversations with Idi Amin; Jean Bedel Bokassa; Wojciech Jaruzelski; Nexhmije Hoxha (who, with her husband Enver, ruled Albania for nearly 50 years until his death); Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier; and Mengitsu Haile Mariam, the Marxist-Leninist dictator of Ethiopia.⁶

What is clear from the conversations is that they are all as mad as Diana and Oswald Mosley. Yet they all insist that whatever evil they may have done—mass murder, starvation, grand larceny—they were only making the world a better place. And none of them regretted or repented anything, except for the tactical “mistakes” that got them booted out of their countries eventually.

At least Diana Mitford Mosley had no blood on her hands. And, after four decades of peer pressure, she did finally admit that her wedding guests were not the nicest folks you could have to a party. “We all know he was a monster, that he was very cruel and did terrible things,” she said of Hitler in 1994. “But that doesn’t alter the fact that he was obviously an interesting figure. No torture on Earth would get me to say anything different.”⁷

Diana Mitford Mosley—may she Rest In Peace . . .

WORLD IMPROVERS

The trouble with the big wide world is that it is never quite good enough for some people. They keep trying to improve it. No harm in that; you should always try to make your world a better place. Wink at a homely girl, perhaps, or curse a bad driver. But the world improvers are rarely content with private acts of kindness. Instead, they want gas chambers and Social Security—vast changes almost always brought about at the point of a gun. Thus it was that central banks were set up and given the power to control what doesn't belong to them—your money. Thus it came to be that we got regularly felt up by strangers at airports—and thought it normal.

Today's newspapers ooze world improvements. A single day's issue of the *New York Times*—an especially earnest journal—brings forth a plague of them. On the editorial page one day is “A Proposal to End Poverty.” The proposal is made by world-class world improver, Jeffrey Sachs, who urges rich nations to rob their own citizens so that the money might be turned over to poor nations.⁸

While the *New York Times* merely dreams of ending poverty, our favorite columnist, Thomas L. Friedman, joins our president in wanting to “rid the world of evildoers.” We are not making this up; this was George W. Bush's own line. Bush, Tony Blair, and Friedman are hoping that the forced conversion of the Iraqis—to democracy—will squeeze out a little more evil from the planet.⁹

When it comes to resisting the temptations of world improvement, married men, especially those with teenage children, have a great advantage. They are too busy trying to earn a living to pose much of a threat to anyone. And when they are not actually working, they have family tensions to arbitrate, tempers to calm, lightbulbs to change, and doorknobs to fix. There is something about domestic life that tames a man . . . brings him down to earth . . . and keeps him tethered and modest. If he is ever tempted to think he knows something, he has his wife and children to remind him how wrong he is.

The single man, on the other hand, is a desperado. Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin were, effectively, single. So was Alexander the

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Great. They had no private lives; they had perforce to make public spectacles of themselves. The single man still feels the need to be a conqueror—of women or of men—by seduction or by brute force. That is why the public generally elects family men to high office; they don't trust the lone wolf. That may be one reason why George W. Bush—a married man—is likely to be denied the success that more notorious, and single, world improvers have had.

Take Alexander the Great, for instance. The American public learned all it needed to know about Alexander in 2004, when the Oliver Stone film first hit the screen. The scenery is fabulous—mountains, deserts, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. There are extravagant battle scenes, Persian war chariots running through the Greeks' battle squares, elephant charges in the Indus valley. . . . Oliver Stone has done what we thought almost impossible. Using all of this and all the tricks of the filmmaker's art, he has produced a boring film. Not that it is a bad flick. Not at all. It would take a new script, a new cast, and a whole new shooting to get the level up to "bad." As it stands, it is merely pathetic. The only thing impressive about it is the ability of two of the leading actors to say the most absurd things without smiling. Alexander, for example, looks up toward the heavens and dreamily explains that he is conquering the whole Middle East in the name of "liberty." Readers will remark that George W. Bush does and says similar things. Neoconservatives even think they see a bit of Alexander in the American president—perhaps the curl of his hair, the cut of his jaw, or the humbug of his palaver. Maybe so. But we had hoped for more. Art should never be as dull and dim-witted as real life.

Invading Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans are following in the Macedonian's footprints. In fact, it is hard to go anywhere in the Middle East without tramping on one of Alexander's trails. In the spring of 334 B.C., for instance, Alexander's army crossed the Hellespont into what is today Turkey. What an adventure! Battles, jewels, women, strong drink, new and exotic places—what man could ask for more? The route was long—all the way to Libya and then over to the Indus river. But the poor man died less than 10 years after leaving

Greece, brought down not by the Iraqis or the Afghanis of the time, but by fever. Alexander had won every major battle, but he was a dead man at 33.

In the scene that is most memorable—because it is so bad—this ersatz Alexander turns his face to the sky and dreams of a better world . . . while his friend dies on the bed next to him. Like all world improvers ever since, the only better world Alexander could see was the reflection of his own face.

Just as Alexander wanted to remake Babylon into a Greek city, the new conquerors, two millennia later, try to turn Baghdad into an Anglo-American one. They want the Iraqis to “reform” their government. What the do-gooders mean is they want it made more like theirs. Private acts of charity or innovation that might actually make the world better are of little interest to the world improvers. They propose a ban on world hunger—without planting a single turnip. They take up the cause of “freedom” in other countries—and force the liquor store next door to close on Sunday. They insist so strongly on better treatment for women in the Islamic world, they forget to kiss their own wives.

Another *New York Times* columnist, David Brooks, is not content with poverty eradication and forced conversion to democracy. From this day forward, said Brooks, just after a State of the Union address in which George W. Bush had announced his aim of “ending tyranny in our world,” the American president “will not be able to have warm relations” with dictators.¹⁰

We don’t know what air Mr. Brooks breathes, but we suggest he open a window. He may be in need of oxygen. Already the U.S. president has sworn off drinks; if he swears off dictators as well, he will be as worthless, indeed as positively dangerous, in foreign affairs as Woodrow Wilson was. As for ending tyranny, Mr. Bush might just as well have pledged to ban bad taste . . . or ugliness . . . or death itself. In the contest between tyranny and George W. Bush, we have seen no odds. But we wouldn’t put our money on the president. Mr. Bush has had only seven years of practice in high office. Tyranny has been rehearsing for centuries.

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But while the President and his merry band of freedom fighters may claim they are jousting on behalf of democracy, it is not really the vote that they want to spread so much as their own favorite vision. After all, Hitler won elections. So did Mussolini. And Genghis Khan . . . and even Montezuma. No, what the world improvers want is a globe as familiar as their own boudoirs. If other people have other tastes and other ideas, well, they must be uneducated . . . or evil. Brooks claims, “It’s the ideals that matter.” He means *his own* ideals, of course. What he objects to are other people’s ideals . . . and, as long as he has more firepower on his side, he doesn’t mind forcing the issue.

Of course, ideals *do* matter. Honesty, integrity, honor, love, service, dignity, frugality, industry, self-discipline, charity—these are the qualities that make the world a better place. Brooks’ ideals, on the other hand, are merely excuses for vain meddling. If an election is held in Iraq, will the world be a better place? No one knows. What really moves the world improvers is vanity; and what makes them odious is that they give in to it so readily.

STILL TRYING TO HUSTLE THE EAST

But, even in a whole nation of hallucinators, the grandeur of *New York Times* editorialist Thomas L. Friedman’s follies stand out. Take that column in which he complained about “America’s Failure of Imagination.” In it, Friedman imagined Osama bin Laden as “a combination of Charles Manson and Jack Welch”—an evil personality, but with organizational skills. “We Americans can’t imagine such evil,” said Friedman. “We keep reverting to our natural, naively optimistic selves.”¹¹

Actually, at the time he wrote it, Americans were showing signs not of a lack of imagination, but of imagination run wild. Nuns and Girl Scouts were being patted down in airports all across the country. Penny loafers were being x-rayed. Tech stocks were selling at 60 times earnings . . . and U.S. Treasury bonds, at par. Americans had come to believe the most extraordinary things—not only

that their soldiers could create American-style democracy in ancient Mesopotamia, but that they themselves could borrow and spend as much as they wanted, as long as they wanted, without ever having to pay anyone anything back. And Friedman himself seemed to have a full tank of imagination.

Still, according to our gassed-up columnist, the 39,000 employees of the National Security Agency and the hundreds of thousands of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employees, police, Homeland Security staff, and soldiers were not enough for America's imagining needs. "We need an 'Office of Evil,'" he urged, "whose job would be to constantly sift all intelligence data and imagine what the most twisted mind might be up to."¹²

Friedman went on to blame the Bush administration for "squandering all the positive feeling in America after September 11, particularly among Americans who wanted to be drafted for a great project."

What great project?

How about "a Manhattan project for energy independence . . . to wean us gradually off oil imports"?

Not only is there a shortage of imagination among America's security forces, but money is short, too. A billion dollars a week was the cost of the Iraq adventure at the time. But even that was not enough for Friedman. "Building a nation on the cheap," said he, wouldn't work. How he had come to know what it cost to build a nation is anyone's guess. No bids had been let, nor had any nation ever actually been put together by another. What did it cost to build China, or France, or Canada? In every case, the job was done by the people of the country themselves, stumbling toward it over the course of many, many years.

But Friedman was in a hot sweat of war fever. As one of the biggest backers of war against Iraq, he urged the Bush administration every week to plunge in deeper. One of his columns even began with the shocking announcement that "The U.S. and France Are Now At War."¹³ What stirred his delirium in this instance was French president Jacques Chirac's plan for straightening out the Iraq situation.

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Chirac's was an absurd plan, perhaps, but compared to Friedman's suggestions, it was almost reasonable. We were in Paris at the time and noticed that the French took the war news calmly. Women walked down the street in light, filmy dresses, admiring the new fall fashions in the shop windows . . . businessmen and saloon keepers went about their daily chores. They seemed unaware that Friedman was urging an attack.

The problem with real war, you see, is that people get killed. Friedman was ready to send the troops off to do his errands, but when the boys came back flat, the columnist could not bear to open the bags and look the poor dead grunts in the face. He would rather imagine his soldiers as they have never been and as no serious man would ever want to see them—dressed up in black turtlenecks with Birkenstocks on their feet and glasses of chardonnay in their hands.

American soldiers are not in Iraq as conquerors or warriors, writes Friedman. Instead, they're idealists sent, alas, by a "non-healing administration" on the "most important liberal, revolutionary U.S. democracy-building project since the Marshall Plan." "Nurturing," says the cuddly Friedman, "that is our real goal in Iraq."¹⁴

Readers must have gasped for air. The largest, most sophisticated and most lethal military force ever assembled—at a cost of, what, a quarter of a trillion dollars—was sent to "nurture" the desert tribes?

Hardly a week went by in the early years of the third millennium in which Friedman did not come up with yet another mind-boggling idea. In February 2005, for instance, he told readers of a scheme that had originated with his wife, Ann: "Free parking anywhere in America for anyone driving a hybrid car."¹⁵ The specifics of this diktat were, as usual, not spelled out. We doubt that he would like us to park our old pickup in his garage free of charge, or on the White House lawn at any price.

Nor do we yet know what he meant by "hybrid car." A cross between a Volvo and a hyena? The fruit of the union of an SUV with a Greyhound bus? We presume he was talking about a mixture of gasoline and electric power . . .

So many humbugs, dear reader, and so little time.

We would not normally waste our time explaining why a columnist's proposal is lame and preposterous. It seems enough to hold it up to the light to see how threadbare it is. But in this case, we are compelled to undertake a bit of surgery, not to save it, for it never really had a chance of life, but to see how it was put together in the first place.

Let us say that we were to take Friedman's proposal seriously and that, tomorrow, Congressmen were to eat a foul breakfast . . . and, with a kind of grave indigestion disturbing their thoughts and gas pains choking their laughter . . . were to make it the law of the land. Henceforth, a fellow with a hybrid car would be able to park free, wherever he wanted. We will have to pass over the practical innards of the plan—how the owners of the parking spaces would be compensated, the paperwork, the enforcement, and so forth—and move at once to its theoretical pangs. Readers will quickly see that in order to improve the world in this manner, millions of private arrangements would first have to be *disimproved*. Someone must make up the lost parking revenue. Instead of buying an extra beer or upgrading his flight to Jamaica, the taxpayer must divert some of his spending power to pay for someone else's parking space. And those who get the free spaces then find that they have a little extra cash in their pockets to buy things they could not previously afford. And so the whole world is tilted, and everyone stands a little at an angle. Central planning will have created a world closer to Mr. Friedman's liking, but everyone else's planet will have been disturbed.

But maybe it is all still worthwhile. Who knows? Certainly not Thomas Friedman. Consider that this exercise in mass inconvenience is supposed to reduce America's use of oil . . . in order to reduce oil revenues to Iran and Saudi Arabia . . . which would in turn require these oil producers to "reform." But if there's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip, as the ancient proverb put it, here—the cup and lip might as well be on different planets. Americans who agree with Friedman are already free to buy hybrid cars, or they can simply drive their existing gas-guzzlers less often. His proposal is not needed for either. What it is really designed to do is discomfort those who don't

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agree with him; it is merely another way of bossing other people around, under cover of a “good purpose.”

Do hybrid cars really reduce energy consumption? We don’t know. They may use less energy per mile, but they may take more to make. Or to service . . . or drivers may be encouraged to drive more. Besides, in order for the free parking bribe to have any impact, it would have to be widely taken up. In other words, the world’s auto factories would have to switch over to producing millions of hybrid cars. Whether this would actually reduce energy consumption we don’t know, but the changeover itself would require massive new capital investment and retooling—which, itself, would mean the consumption of much more energy. Then, of course, the cities would be stuffed with cars parking for free and there would arise a whole new energy-guzzling bureaucracy to enforce and regulate the new system.

Meanwhile, regardless of whether even a linear of oil were actually saved, the price of petroleum might still rise to \$100 a barrel in a few years, since world over, the easy oil has already been pumped out. And even then, Asia has three trillion people who are getting richer every day and are beginning to lick at the world’s oil supplies like lost kittens at a bowl of milk. Americans might feel vaguely superior driving around in hybrid cars and parking in spaces provided at someone else’s expense, but they are not likely to have much effect on the oil price.

But so what? Why does Friedman think that a high oil price stifles reform, or that the reforms that might be coming are the ones he would want? What if Iran and Saudi Arabia have world improvers of their own, with proposals even more absurd (if conceivable), and more lethal, than Friedman’s? But no, Friedman thinks he can see not only his own future but, apparently, everyone else’s.

But that is the indiscreet charm of the man—like all world improvers, he is a dreamy jackass. Ignorance increases by the square of the distance from a given event, so the odds that things won’t work out the way you expect must be multiplied by the squares of all the intervening events. Between a proclamation of free parking for hybrid car drivers and the kind of “reform” in Iran that Friedman wants

to see are a number of potential obstacles: People have to drive a lot of hybrid cars (enough to slacken oil sales); demand for oil actually has to go down (someone has to tell the rising middle classes in the rest of the world to turn down the air-conditioning); the price of oil actually has to fall (note to the feds: stop undermining the dollar; note to oil producers: keep pumping more oil, even if demand falls); Iran actually has to make less money from its oil exports (another note to Iran—pump more, but make sure you don't make more money from it); then, Iran actually has to be pressured to do something because of the lower oil revenues; and last of all, Iran must undertake a program of "reform" that would suit Mr. Friedman (we do not even consider here whether it would suit anyone else or whether it would increase the sum of human happiness in the world). Each of these events is at best a 50/50 proposition. Actually, we rate the likelihood of a fall in oil prices as a consequence of free parking for hybrids at zero, but for the purpose of this little exercise, we will spot the columnist a few points and simplify the math. Even if the odds of each event were one in two, the odds of the whole chain of events working out as expected could be expressed as $.5 \times .5 \times .5 \times .5 \times .5 \times .5$. We're not even going to bother with the math. What it amounts to is this: Icebergs will float in hell before free parking spaces for hybrids bring desirable "reform" to Iran.

"Well," you may say, "of course free parking won't do the job alone, but at least it's a step in the right direction." But who knows what direction the world is going . . . and whether it is right or wrong? If high oil revenues lead to wicked government, why is Texas no less wicked today than it was in its peak oil exporting era 40 years ago? The United Kingdom realized huge revenues from its North Sea rigs during the Margaret Thatcher years. We do not recall any outcry that the country was in need of regime change as a result. On the other hand, an oil exporter that *is* being widely tagged for regime change is Venezuela . . . whose government was duly elected and is thus under the heel of the majority . . . just as Friedman would want it.

However, just as high oil revenues don't always lead to wickedness, the lack of them doesn't guarantee virtue. Germany in the 1940s was

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not known for oil revenues or enlightened government. Nor was Italy. And if you go back more than a century, you won't find a single example of a people who were corrupted by oil profits or redeemed by cheap oil. It was not an oil bonanza that led Caesar to cross the Rubicon or drove the Huns to terrorize Europe or lured the Mongols into India. More recently, we don't recall newsworthy reforms in Iran, even when oil revenues declined sharply in the 1980s. As we remember it, the price of oil dropped 75 percent. If falling oil revenues led directly to "reform," you'd think that every oil exporter in the world would have reformed itself under that kind of pressure. Of course, if they had, Friedman would see nothing to reform now. Sin and wickedness have been with us for much longer than the internal combustion engine. We doubt that they will disappear, even if the price of oil were to drop to zero.

And yet, to give him his due, who today can say without doubt that Friedman is wrong? Who can say for sure that parking a hybrid for free in a downtown lot in Des Moines won't be the "tipping point" that causes a collapse in oil prices . . . the little butterfly that flaps its wings and sets in motion a whole chain of airy events . . . leading to a tornado in downtown Tehran? Finally, suddenly, a new wind could blow through the Persian capital . . . and the mullahs would see their turbans take flight!

CALIPHS AND CRUSADERS

Nor is it the first time that people have tried to do good in the Near East. At the end of the eleventh century, Europeans decided to bring the blessings of Christian governance to the desert tribes. The Crusades of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries were doomed from the beginning. The Crusaders had the will and the weapons to kick Arab butts; what they lacked was a real reason for doing so, for Christianity was already firmly rooted in the Holy Lands, as it had been for more than 1,000 years, even though

Jerusalem had fallen to the caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab in February of 638.

Amin Maalouf, in a delightful little book, *The Crusades from the Arab Point of View*, tells us how it happened:

Umar had entered Jerusalem astride his famous white camel, and the Greek patriarch of the holy city came forward to meet him. The caliph first assured him that the lives and property of the city's inhabitants would be respected, and then asked the patriarch to take him to visit the Christian holy places. The time of Muslim prayer arrived while they were in the church of Qiyama, the Holy Sepulchre, and Umar asked his host if he could unroll his prayer mat. The patriarch invited Umar to do so right where he stood but the caliph answered: "If I do, the Muslims will want to appropriate this site, saying 'Umar prayed here.'" Then, carrying his prayer mat, he went and knelt outside.¹⁶

Jerusalem was taken again, in July 1099, by the Crusaders. This time Christians were the victors and the handover much less gracious.

The population of the holy city was put to the sword, and the Franj [Franks] spent a week massacring Muslims. They killed more than seventy thousand people in al-Aqsa mosque. Ibn al-Qalanisi, who never reported figures he could not verify, says only: Many people were killed. The Jews had gathered in their synagogue and the Franj burned them alive.¹⁷

Not even their coreligionists were spared, adds Maalouf.

... They arrested the priests who had been entrusted with custody of the Cross and tortured them to make them reveal the secret.¹⁸

This was only the beginning. Soon, the Franks were drawn into the internecine killings and intramural murders that afflicted the area.

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Crusaders would make an alliance with the Eastern Orthodox emperor one day to fight one of the various Muslim warlords, viziers, caliphs, pashas, or Seljuks in the region. The next day, they would side with the Muslims and turn on the Eastern Empire. A particularly blockheaded Crusader was Reynald de Chatillon, known as “brins Arnat” (Prince Arnat) by the Arab chroniclers, to whom the Arabs refer whenever they want to prove that the Crusaders were wicked barbarians.

Reynald launched a punitive raid against Cyprus—a Christian island under the rule of the Eastern Empire—and demanded money from the patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch to pay for the expedition. Naturally, the patriarch resisted. But Reynald had ways of getting people to cooperate; he tortured the priest and covered his wounds with honey. He then chained him down and left him in the sun for a whole day while insects feasted on him.

Even a good man yields to the proper persuasion. Reynald got his money, and the campaign against Cyprus was on. Amin Maalouf describes what happened next:

Before setting off loaded with booty, Reynald ordered all the Greek priests and monks assembled; he then had their noses cut off before sending them, thus mutilated, to Constantinople.¹⁹

Hassan-i-Sabbah was born in 1048, not far from the present city of Tehran. Like Osama bin Laden many years later, Hassan had an ax to grind. And like Osama, he ground it on the whetstone provided by his Western allies. What stuck in Hassan’s craw was the remarkable change that took place in the Arab world in the eleventh century. Shiism had dominated the region at the time of his birth. But the victory of the Seljuk Turks pushed the Shia to the back of the bus. The Seljuks were Sunnites and defenders of Sunni orthodoxy. Hassan fell in with Muslim fundamentalists and was soon active in a resistance movement centered in Cairo. In

1090, he made a sudden and successful assault on the eagle's-nest fortress at Alamout, near the Caspian Sea, giving him a base of operations—like Osama's mountain redoubts—that was inaccessible and impregnable. There, he recruited an army and trained them in terror.

The terrorists of the eleventh century had no fertilizer bombs and no commercial airplanes. All they had was the equivalent of box cutters—knives. Their technique was to infiltrate an enemy's city, pretending to be merchants or religious ascetics. Circulating around town, they got to know their target's movements while making themselves unremarkable. Then, they would spring on him suddenly and stick a knife between his ribs. So single-minded and unflappable were Hassan's agents that witnesses thought they must be drugged with hashish. Thus did they come to be known as the *haschaschin*, which evolved into the word we know, assassin. The Crusaders saw the assassins not as a threat, but as an opportunity. Like the Reagan administration in the twentieth century, the Franks of the twelfth century decided to make common cause with the assassins against their common enemy—Seljuk Shiite Muslims. Thus, the initial intentions, premises, and causes of the whole business were lost. *Quo fata ferunt*.

When the Crusaders arrived in the Holy Land, they found a place of general religious tolerance—there were churches next to synagogues, down the street from mosques. They also found a region that was divided into hundreds of political units, where loyalties and alliances were as unreliable as a discount airline is today. The Muslim world posed no threat to the Christian West; it was too disorganized, and it was unable to protect itself and incapable of projecting much in the way of military power.

But the Crusades changed that. Gradually, under Nouredin and then Saladin, the Islamic world came together to drive out the Franks. At the decisive battle of Hittin, Saladin brought together troops from all over the Near East and faced none other than Reynald de

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Chatillon. Al-Malik al-Afdal, Saladin's son, then just 17 years old, described the battle:

"When the king of the Franj found himself on the hill, he and his men launched a fierce attack that drove our own troops back to the place where my father was standing. I looked at him. He was saddened; he frowned and pulled nervously at his beard. Then he advanced, shouting 'Satan must not win!' "²⁰

Saladin once again forced the enemy to retire to the hill, but when his son called out in triumph, he silenced him. Victory, he said, would not be won until a nearby tent collapsed. He had not yet finished the sentence when the tent did collapse. Saladin then dismounted, knelt, and thanked God, crying for joy.

Saladin had a reputation for mercy and evenhandedness. But it was a rough place and a rough time, and the Franks, especially, had a reputation for butchery. When Richard the Lionhearted took the city of Acre, for example, he massacred 2,700 soldiers he had taken prisoner, plus an additional 300 women and children found in the city. Under similar conditions, Saladin usually let his captives go free. But so great was his disgust with Reynald that the great caliph vowed to kill him with his own hands. When the prisoner was brought before him, he made good his promise.

Back in the homeland, A.D. 2005, most Americans persuaded themselves that, like the Crusaders, their troops were doing God's work in the land of the ancient Mesopotamians. But every action in a public spectacle is clownish or murderous. Every idea is buffoonish. Every outcome is perverse. And the fool who gets the thing going usually ends up with a monument in granite and an eternity in hell.