



The Weight of a Mustard Seed: An Iraqi General's Moral Journey During the Time of Saddam

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General Kamel Sachet was a favorite of Saddam Hussein's, a hero of the Iran-Iraq war, head of the army in Kuwait City during Desert Storm, governor of the province of Maysan, and father of nine children. When author Wendell Steavenson became intrigued by his story, she began with a few questions about Sachet and his fellow Baathist loyalists: "Why had they served such a regime? How had they accommodated their own morality? How had they lived? How had they lived with themselves?" Her journey to find these answers took five years, and an accumulation of facts, opinions, fears, confessions and suspicions from Sachet's family, friends, and enemies. The result is not just a gripping account of one man's rise and fall, but a vivid and compassionate portrayal of the Iraqi people.

As Sachet rose from policeman to Special Forces officer and then General, he made more and more sacrifices to remain in Saddam's good favor. Steadfast in his loyalty to God and his President, Sachet attended military executions and endured his own imprisonment as Saddam's behavior took increasingly paranoid and power-crazy turns. But when it came time for Sachet's sons to do their military service, he refused to let them join the "criminal" organization to which he had given his life. Kamel Sachet realized, too late, that he'd become a participant in the terror regime that had strangled his country and destroyed its people. Through his story and the stories of those around him, Wendell Steavenson shows the choices Iraqis have had to make between exile and collaboration, God and jihad. Here are the Iraqis behind the headlines and the tragedy begotten of unintended consequences. And here is the first full-length narrative from an immensely talented journalist who has already been compared by critics to Bruce Chatwin and Ryszard Kapucinski.

The Weight of a Mustard Seed: An Iraqi General's Moral Journey During the Time of Saddam Details

Date : Published March 1st 2009 by Collins (first published January 1st 2009)

ISBN : 9780061721786

Author : Wendell Steavenson

Format : Hardcover 288 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Biography, History, Abandoned



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Abby Mcnaughton says

Steavenson's voice comes out a lot in this book, which is unusual for a biography but perhaps less so for a political one. On the one hand, we can hear her fire, her passion and care for the people she finds. But alongside this is her anger and even judgment of those people. It was still informative and interesting; she has a lot to say about the intricate web of recent(ish) events in Iraq. But Steavenson's tale of this chapter of Iraqi history is far more cohesive than her exploration of Kamel Sachet's life, the purported subject of the book. This is what got me. The biography was much more like a semi-structured opinion piece than, well, a biography. I just didn't like how strongly the voice of a Western journalist could be heard in what was supposed to be a book about an Iraqi general's life and the choices he made. Oftentimes bringing in the stories of others is an essential part of writing a sensitive biography, which was clearly the goal here. Steavenson simply went overboard. It's not a bad book, it just doesn't live up to its subtitle. I feel like she overshadows Sachet's story, and that frustrates me.

Sanjay Varma says

I enjoyed the first 75 pages, during which time all the major themes and characters are introduced. There are episodes from Saddam's rise to power, the Iran-Iraq war, Kuwait invasion and Gulf war, stagnation during the 90's sanctions, and the final US invasion and occupation. But this book is a little disorganized and I could see that it was just going to keep revisiting these time periods and dropping more anecdotes that essentially made the same points over and over again.

I think the main point is that Saddam's brutality killed off idealism and punished individual initiative. As a result the country sank into corruption and inertia. It wasn't possible to oppose Saddam so everyone in the country collaborated with his policies, and nobody shows any guilt about it.

Pretty much what you'd expect. A lot of the writing is good. But the characters that the author focuses on aren't really that interesting. Plus, magazine writers are so godawful at writing full length books. They all think the same thing... that a book is just twenty magazine articles strung together. :(

Rachel says

Wendell Steavenson has a punctuation problem. What some may call her "lyrical" style is really just bad punctuation and terrible grammar. Her sentences are frequently run-ons devoid of any discernible grammatical structure, and her punctuation is sporadic at best. Comma splices abound. Together, these difficulties and others make the text somewhat difficult to decipher in places.

Why harp on her grammar and usage when certainly larger topics are discussed in the text? Her language obscures meaning, and seems to be a prime example (or perhaps even a compounding) of the sort of

confusion and miscommunication at play in so much of the strife and discord of the region. Why exacerbate the culture clash with language misuse? This book is meant to be "the Intimate Story of an Iraqi General and His Family During Thirty Years of War and Tyranny" (or "An Iraqi General's Moral Journey During the Time of Saddam," depending on which edition you have), but the book seems to get caught up in the morass of two warring cultures, and never really finds strong footing.

Clarity is what is lacking from this book as a whole. Steavenson offers little sense of purpose in her narrative -- she doesn't tell us why she chose Kamel Sachet as the focus of her study, for example, and she never really explains what the reader is supposed to get out of the story. Even the title is somewhat obscure, unless a reader is familiar with the Koran. Ligaya Mishan at *The New Yorker* online explains: "The title comes from the Koran, a reminder that, such is the delicacy and precision of the scales of justice at the final judgment, 'even the weight of a mustard seed' -- the slightest flicker of conscience, perhaps -- may sway the balance."

So the book's purpose may be obvious from the title, but it would have been nice to hear it from her perspective. Providing a clear sense of purpose is really an author's duty, after all -- as is providing a clear and unifying theme, or some clear sense of direction. The composition is sloppy, and seems to be more a collection of various interviews and anecdotes the author has collected than a biography or political history. The narrative, like its author, wanders from place to place and person to person, drawing no direct links between them and arriving at no conclusions beyond the statement of factual events.

Perhaps Steavenson does not feel it is her place to draw conclusions. That would be a respectable stance; the Americans are, after all, foreign invaders in Iraq. But for those readers with little background on the current (and past) situations in Iraq, this meandering narrative does little to help clarify the state of life in Iraq. All accounts offered herein are hearsay, and who knows whether they might be true? Steavenson seems just as unreliable a journalist as any -- perhaps more so, for her failure to complete her construction of the story within this book. (This discussion at *The New Yorker* is far more generous in response to her style, however.)

I will say that the book offers quite interesting insight into the psyche of people living in Iraq, both now and throughout the last thirty years. All the personal interviews and anecdotes collected here offer a series of voices with a common thread: the ability to cope with extreme circumstances, and the need to keep silent about the precise nature of those experiences. While the different members of this cast of characters each has his/her own motivations and mechanisms for coping and keeping relatively silent, the different voices weave in and out of the narrative to offer some very striking cultural perspectives. For that, if nothing else, this book is worth reading.

Anna Ligtenberg says

ISBN 0061721786 - Iraq is one of those countries that, until there's a conflict, I don't tend to think about very much. Part of the reason is that there isn't a lot out there in the way of in-depth, detailed looks at the country or the people. This book appeared to fill that gap some, so I read it with great interest.

Kamel Sachet grows up under Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, often uncomfortable with the way the country was run and the rules that, as an adult, he becomes responsible for enforcing. The story is told through the eyes of third parties who knew Sachet at various stages of his life, including his family, and some who had insight into the events surrounding his death just as U.S. forces begin the "shock and awe" campaign.

Despite the fact that the book is about Sachet and his family, I never really got a strong sense of them as

individuals. This turned out to not be a bad thing, in my opinion, because the book ended up appealing to a less personal question I always wonder: How is it possible that a normal, thinking person ends up knowingly supporting, and even participating in, a government that does extraordinary evil? It may not be possible to answer that question completely, but Steavenson does put a few pieces of the puzzle on the table. With some clues to that question, the paths taken by Sachet's sons come as less of a surprise.

If I have any complaint, it's with the way the book is put together. Steavenson speaks, through interpreters, to various Iraqis. The stories of these people all tie into the story of Sachet, and each of these people are introduced in a new chapter. The first time a person is introduced this way, it seems to be very out of the blue; the second time it feels a little less so and by the third, the pattern is more than evident - but the choice seems a strange one and the style seems disjointed at first.

- AnnaLovesBooks

Wendy says

I am having the hardest time thinking of something to say about *The Weight of a Mustard Seed*. I am just plain stuck. I liked the book, some parts more than others. I thought it was relevant to the times, informative, and thought provoking. I have read a handful of reviews in which this book is described as reading like a novel, but I cannot say that proved true for me. It definitely read like a nonfiction book—and not at all in a bad way. It certainly lends credibility to the author's research and efforts in putting together and writing this book.

Author and journalist Wendell Steavenson spent many years researching her story, interviewing various sources, reading through documents, and living in the country she wrote about. In part, she wanted to know why: why reputable people like General Kamel Sachet would remain loyal to a government regime that he did not agree with, one that, at times, was oppressive, practiced torture and executed people for believing differently or speaking out, including his own followers and supporters.

Although the author sets out to tell the story of General Kamel Sachet, there are many stories within the novel about individuals, some powerful and some with no power at all, sharing their experiences. The book spans over several years, marking much of Saddam Hussein's reign over Iraq. While the focus of the book is on the negative impact of Saddam Hussein's rule over Iraq, the author does make mention of some of the positives as well, however briefly.

The people, including those in high positions, had to adapt as best they could to survive, sometimes compromising their own beliefs, whether through denial or looking the other way. They rationalized their actions or lack thereof. The author points out the difference in cultures and beliefs between the West and the Middle East through the words of those she interviews. Wendell Steavenson also uses science to seek answers to her questions, looking into psychological studies conducted in the United States. The scientific results are not all that different from what happened in real life Iraq, demonstrating that man is not so different even countries and cultures apart.

The Weight of a Mustard Seed provides no real new insights into those age old questions, "Why did you go along with what you knew was wrong? Why didn't you speak out when so many of you disagreed? Why didn't you do something to stop it?" However, what the book does offer is insight into a people and country that have been in turmoil for many years. It shows the strength and resilience of individuals who do what they feel they must to survive. Unfortunately, some do turn to extremism as a way to survive, and it really is

no wonder considering the life they have known, the constant fear they live in. There are many though who do not go that route, and who instead are trying their best to get by and hoping for a better day, one free of occupation and oppression, one where they can walk down the street without fear.

Kirsten says

I felt like the author expects the reader to know a great deal before reading this book. E.g the people, the culture, the religion, the geography, the places, the history. I found this book difficult to follow and hard to engage with the people because there was very little narrative and story progression. Just a miss from me.

Donald Pryde says

Great book about an Iraqi General and his family who falls foul of Saddam Hussein.

Suzy says

Like other reviewers I enjoyed the start of this book as it balanced the personal anecdotes with historic detail. Iraq before Saddam's fall was not an area of history I was familiar with, and I learnt a good deal about life in that part of the world. However soon the author imposed her voice over the book and it became about the telling of historic events. I felt the characters got lost and I didn't care what happened if I didn't hear it from the people's perspective. I gave up at just over 50% completed. Such a pity as it could have been much better in my opinion.

Antigone says

Wendell Steavenson is a journalistic wild child. I'm sure she works assignments; her reportage has appeared in The London Observer, The New Yorker, and Time. But when it comes to her books she climbs off the beaten path to pursue a more selfish course. She has questions of her own. Curiosities. Concerns. In her first release, *Stories I Stole*, her attentions were directed toward the former Soviet republic of Georgia and the everyday life of a citizenry struggling to locate its place on the planet, independent of a wider socialist confederation. Her second offering, *The Weight of a Mustard Seed*, finds her in Iraq pestering the collaborationists of Saddam's regime for, as she puts it, the "why-how" of their willingness to simply go along with the dictates of Hussein and his progeny, Uday and Qusay.

I try every so often, as Steavenson is doing here, to break away from the news cycle and what even the legitimate media is telling me I should prioritize. Because it's easy to dismiss this dictator and his two psychotic sons; to move past what, from the Western view, is now inactive as a force and sailing into the sea of the historian. But the reality is that there are millions of people alive in that region today who scrabbled beneath the boot of this despotic regime, whose existences were not only circumscribed by its brutal restriction, but formed and fed - both externally and internally - by the state of Hussein's mind. And those living people will, today and tomorrow and for years to come, determine the destiny of Iraq. It is perhaps, I

think, a good idea to hear from them.

Steavenson chooses as her focus the figure of General Kamel Sachet, a member of Saddam's inner core of commanders - noted for his leadership in the Iran-Iraq war and head of the army in Kuwait City during Desert Storm. Sachet disappeared from the scene on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, but his story up to that day was one of a solid soldier who wrestled with the insanity of the actions he'd been ordered to take; who loved his country but grew increasingly restless with its leadership and practices. A man who, as he aged, turned more and more for solace from the strictures of his faith. Steavenson speaks to his family, his friends, his brothers-in-arms, anyone and everyone who knew him in an effort to cull the rationale at play in the psyches of those who did Saddam's bidding.

I do have a warning here. Steavenson is on a quest for understanding, which means she's processing truth on the fly. As such, her work drifts at times into a more poetic frame of reference - which is to say there will be passages that are rough to reason and a number of sentences that won't make sense. It's an incredibly authentic mode of expression, though not always geared toward the understanding of another. This can prove frustrating. Still, she's doing some very interesting work in a very interesting way. If this hurdle is one you're willing to accommodate, I would recommend her.

Marguerite says

A very insightful book about Iraq during and after Saddam Hussein. Wendell Steavenson focuses on an Iraqi general and his family and acquaintances to tell the story of modern Iraq. Steavenson is able to tell her story without being influenced much by U.S. foreign policy, so it's a fairly unfiltered view. I say fairly unfiltered deliberately. All the Iraqis with whom she speaks filter recent history through their own lenses. Despite that, and a tendency to rationalize, I think Steavenson comes nearer the ideal of balance than anything else I've read recently. And, her B.S. detector is pretty accurate.

"I met many Iraqis: army officers, doctors, university professors, translators, businessmen. I studied each face, listened to each story, weighed the balance of their pauses and signs. I was mindful that my most important question ... 'Didn't you know? WHY?' " was never answered. Each had their own permutation of indignation, explanation, rationalization. It seemed easy enough to blame Saddam, mad monster, instead of admitting that it took thousands of individuals to enforce his will."

"In every interview I ever conducted with Iraqis, was the knowledge that duplicity was as much a part of being Iraqi as excessive pride, excessive hospitality and love of the kebab."

"History -- and people's lives -- are so often reduced to the whim of a bully and some stupid bit of crossed-purpose misunderstanding."

I found four or five typos, which is just annoying.

Murtaza says

Through the life of General Kamel Sachet, this book tells the story of the class of Baathist officers who were deposed by the U.S. invasion. Their story is one of being morally compromised under Saddam's totalitarian rule before being cast adrift the invasion and subsequent civil war. It is a fascinating snapshot of a particular class of people who rose along with the modernization of the Iraqi state and collapsed along with that state as well. Kamel Sachet's life, son of the rural poor, military hero, favorite of Saddam, popular governor, is instructive. He sought solace in religion amid the crushing environment of the Baath Party's Iraq, before losing his own life in one of the innumerable purges undertaken by the regime. You never truly feel like you come to know him in this book, which is nonetheless a valiant effort at piecing together this period of Iraqi history. Amid the stories of Sachet and others, you see a glimpse of the forces that would give birth to Isis years later.

Sean Carman says

Freelance foreign correspondent Wendell Steavenson's second book is a profile of Kamel Sachet, a general in Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army and an Iran-Iraq War hero who grew disenchanted with Hussein's tyrannic rule. Steavenson eloquently reports Sachet's life and career, and the history of Iraq before the American invasion, but it is in the latter part of her book, when she allows herself into the narrative and writes more dramatically and poetically of Sachet's downfall and the complex insanity of Iraq's disintegration, that her narrative really shines. "Iraqis," Steavenson writes, "carried the scars and memories of good and bad and mad and sad and bits of Baathism, globs of pride and an inferiority complex; they carried Koranic *surahs* in their heads along with the precepts of grandfathers, memories of war slogans and the chorus of a Britney Spears song. Fractious, miasmic and changeable: Communist to Baathist. Jingo to war weary. Religious to skeptic. Fanatic to cynic. History doesn't necessarily progress, and people don't follow straight-line lives either."

Louise says

This is the only up close and personal look at someone in Saddam Hussein's ruling circle that I know of. The author researches the life of General Sachet through the only available sources which are his family and circle of acquaintances. To them he is a war hero, a devout Muslim and a family man. He is compassionate towards the poor. He treats his soldiers well. The author gives examples of each of these attributes.

The author does not explore the qualifiers. The Iran-Iraq War was one atrocity after another and heinous acts would be hard to avoid in a war lasting so long. Piety and prayer may be the only socially acceptable way to have solace... to escape. In the absence of any social services and the presence of so many scrambling for Saddam's crumbs, his charitable deeds are striking in comparison to others, not to the gap in wealth and need.

As a member of Saddam's inner circle, he has to have participated in and/or accepted murder and/or torture. He has undoubtedly been compromised, but this is off stage in this book, and probably to his family too. What is clear is that he's been rewarded with a good salary, land and "golden keys" (nice cars) by Saddam. It is also clear that this is not the good life, he has no peace of mind. The General survives his first jail term the reasons for which are unknown. Jail terms come with the turf. The author wonders about the reasons for this

jailing. She also wonders why people obeyed Saddam and seems to miss the connection.

Interestingly, Saddam's Iraq has booze. It is mentioned in passing and as an issue as General Sachet tries to shut down the bars in his province.

At the end of this book, the author describes some of Saddam's other surviving generals and functionaries now in Europe, hoping to avoid prosecution. They are writing their take on recent history. These personal narratives are not expected to be accurate or published.

Steavenson has taken some guff from reviewers. Some of it is for glossing over the general's darker deeds. Some for her searching for answers in the work of psychologists Zimbardo and Milgram and in the writers of the holocaust. For me, this detracts from the text but not Steavenson's achievement. The author has accomplished a worthy goal. In the absence of written records she has pieced together and told the story of a life at the top in Saddam's Iraq. For this I give her 5 stars.

This book has not been given the attention I believe it deserves. It would be good to have more narratives that describe the ordinary lives of Iraqis before and after the war. Another such book, that should receive more attention is Waiting for an Ordinary Day: The Unraveling of Life in Iraq.

Ubah Khasimuddin says

Where to start on this review; this book was everywhere all at once, it starts at the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 but then it backtracks in time. Loosely the story revolves around this Iraqi general, Kamel Sachet, his rise in the Iraqi army, his personal life, how after the defeat in Kuwait his resignation but refusal to quit the army, serving a despot. His turn to Islam and his attempt to stay clean and straight in a country and with a regime that didn't make that possible.

Despite myself I liked this book, for me, it gave me valuable insight into life in Iraq under Saddam Hussain and even in the psyche of the Iraqi. It provides some explanation for the violence that has plagued Iraq since Saddam's downfall.

Why didn't I give it more stars? The story is fairly confusing, the author will introduce new people and give their whole back story, for an entire chapter, so when you get back to the main story of Sachet you are a bit discombobulated, confused. I couldn't keep up with all the names. Additionally, the author adds her thoughts into the story, how she viewed the people she was talking to, which adds further to the muddle. The author also tries to understand why so many people went along with the brutality of the Saddam dictatorship, that should have been a book unto itself - just seemed like a detour in the main story. Finally, the story is pieced together through interviews, and as Sachet is dead, so much is left out, the author can only guess or infer to Sachet's motivates, thoughts, etc. Even his demise, how Sachet was killed is up in the air - too much unresolved; the book ends but I feel left hanging.

Now the big question, would I recommend the book.....yes I would, it definitely lets one see something of everyday ordinary Iraqi's before and after the fall of Saddam Hussain and perhaps why they don't get along and why they don't like the US. Good book for a commuter or on a long plane ride.

David Quinn says

The story pulled me in very quickly and held my interest to the end. The various perspectives of the family, friends and colleagues of Kamel Sachet were very interesting and insightful.
