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Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography

C. J. Krisinger

Barry Rubin

Judith Colp Rubin

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1943 German bombing of the SS *John Harvey*, which was docked in Bari, Italy, secretly holding two thousand M47A1 sulfur mustard (H) bombs. The explosion exposed U.S. personnel and Italian citizens to chemical weapons, which resulted in hundreds of deaths.

This work imparts seminal information on the use of biological and chemical weapons in the ancient world, and as such it provides an outlook missing from much current thought about this era. It is highly recommended.

ZYGMUNT DEMBEK

Lieutenant Colonel, MS, USAR

Author of Biological Weapons Defense (Humana Press, 2004)



Rubin, Barry, and Judith Colp Rubin. *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003. 354pp. \$27.50

The Palestinian people would have been better off as citizens of Israel. That is a conclusion one can reach after digesting the political biography of Yasir Arafat by the veteran Middle Eastern writer-reporter team of Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin.

The book is clear on its takeaways. To understand Arafat, you must understand the “struggle” as well as his record of failure. Arafat now holds the record for creating, and remaining the leader of, the planet’s longest-running revolutionary movement, while at the same time failing to bring the Palestinian struggle to a successful conclusion.

In his adult life, Arafat has spent five decades as a revolutionary, forty years as chief of his own group, thirty-plus years as a leader of an entire people, and seven years as head of a government.

Despite all the opportunities and responsibility, Arafat has not brought the Palestinian people peace, victory, or an independent state. His failures and his own vision of the “struggle” have cost the Palestinians dearly. When, in 2000 at Camp David, he was offered a recognized Palestinian state on generally reasonable terms, he walked away. His rejection of the offer ignited the current *intifadah*.

This fresh dissection of Arafat should be of great interest to *Review* readers looking for insight as to why the United States has often appeared “eager to give Arafat another chance” in its own quest to broker a lasting Middle East peace. For years, no matter how many times Arafat proved unreliable, the United States found reasons to give him another chance. Either he is indispensable to the peacemaking process, or he is the lone remaining roadblock. If the United States is ever to break this maddening cycle, it must first know Arafat for who he really is.

The Rubins’ portrait of Arafat may be the most intimate to date, exposing him to the reader and asking questions that beg for answers. How did such a man become the leader of his people? What human “tools” does Arafat exploit?

If one reads only a single chapter, make it “Being Yasir Arafat.” Reading like a psychological profile from a CIA dossier, this chapter not only details some of Arafat’s most intimate behavior, habits, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies but goes on to connect the dots to provide the *why* of his behavior: Why does Arafat forever wear the traditional Arab *kaffiya* head garb, and why is it folded a certain way? Why does he always sport the scruffy beard? Why is he always dressed in a military uniform when he

is a political leader? Explanations of these quirks provide colorful insight into this man's character.

Violence is a pervasive theme of Arafat's life. Despite his professed commitment to the peace process, Arafat is a demonstrated man of violence, the Rubins charge, well connected to global terrorism. The Rubins present strong evidence that Arafat not only has a long history of duplicity in terrorist events but in many cases personally plotted, encouraged, and triggered the violence himself. As early as the mid-1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Army had a record of involvement in skyjackings, bombings, assassinations, and murders. Arafat learned from experience, despite what world leaders told him, that violence paid.

Overall, the Rubins evince abhorrence of Arafat. It appears there really is little to like about the man. Among other traits, in the Rubins' view, he is petty, arrogant, megalomaniacal, and disingenuous. The Rubins carefully place evidential anecdotes to support their portrayal. Typical is Arafat's purported response to the question of why he lied so much—"I would kill for Palestine, so you don't want me to lie for Palestine?" The book keeps his deplorable traits in plain sight, as a policeman would say, "where it can't hurt you." However much one would just want him to go away, his prominent role in contemporary Middle Eastern affairs cannot be ignored.

This book performs a valuable service as a primer on the characters, organizations, and connections in the shadowy world of Middle Eastern terrorism and Islamic radicalism. A short but useful glossary and chronology further help one make these associations.

This is a pure biography. It is impressively documented with thoughtful analysis, deliberately focused on Yasir Arafat. It is not intended as a history of the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict, or Israel. However, for readers who are already certain about Arafat's character, the Rubins' account may surpass even the most critical assessments.

C. J. KRISINGER

Headquarters, Air Mobility Command
Scott Air Force Base, Illinois



Kerrey, Bob. *When I Was a Young Man: A Memoir*. New York: Harcourt, 2002. 270pp. \$26

Bob Kerrey's absorbing memoir tells the story of his coming of age in the Midwest and his loss of innocence in Vietnam, where he was grievously wounded. Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, former governor and senator from Nebraska, Kerrey opens and closes his book by describing his efforts to keep a promise he made to his dying father—to learn how his father's brother died in World War II. He states that he wanted this work to be about his father and his uncle but that the story he ended up telling "is not the story I intended to tell."

Kerrey first recounts his vintage childhood in Lincoln, Nebraska, and earning his pharmacology degree at the University of Nebraska. In 1966, knowing he would likely be drafted, and inspired by Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, Kerrey joined the Navy and entered Officer Candidate School. Once commissioned, he volunteered for underwater demolition team training, and after completion, he was selected for the