

SAMANTHA POWER
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CHARLES FERGUSON: So we'll see if this thing works.

SAMANTHA POWER: Yeah, so 2002, 2003, I was having – maybe I said in the film, so if I repeat myself, [UI] we were talking before. But when I wrote, you know, *Problem from Hell*, and included the chapter on Saddam and the gassing and so forth; obviously it gave me a familiarity with his brutality that was maybe a little bit unusual in the sort of pundit class, like in the sense that I had sort of just read thousands and thousands of pages of the testimony in the new law. And so I was in that runup, was torn, you know, definitely, as so many humanitarian hawks, liberal interventionists, were. But in the end, because of the way the Bush administration had so gratuitously alienated so many around the world — with not, actually, very little to do with Iraq, but, you know, again, silly things. You know, ICCQ, you know, arrogance, you know, [tonal] issues even. And because of the way we we're responding to 9/11 more broadly, in terms of, you know, such an insensitivity to the roots of terrorism and such a symptom-based approach, it felt to me.

But that combination left us so isolated, in late 2002, early 2003, that in the end, it seemed to me, that in weighing the costs and benefits of intervention, one had to just conclude that it was gonna do more harm than good.

Not necessarily in Iraq, and I was naive about Iraq, 'cause I, of course, like everybody, I wouldn't have anticipated your film, you know, that degree of lack of – I felt whatever the goals were, they would go about pursuing their goals in the same way they go about pursuing elections. You know, like ruthlessly...

CHARLES FERGUSON: More competently.

SAMANTHA POWER: Yeah, needless to say. But maybe by being a bit of an academic here, or a wonk, it seemed — and I wrote and thought about this at the time, so this isn't just me misremembering, retrospectively — but there were these different axes one had to measure. There was

the good it would do to Iraqis — short-term, long-term harm and good — and the harm and good it would do to the region. And then, the harm and good it would do to international rules of the road, and sort of a sense of the sort of systemic points; you know, [but] what would it mean if you could just go invade whatever country you wanted to and, you know, on your own grounds.

And then there was the, what for me as a human rights professor, bizarrely, was the most important thing, which was what actually would invading Iraq do for U.S. security, you know, given how isolated we were.

And here, like the issue of terrorist recruitment and sort of the jihadi magnet, and that was like one of the strongest factors for me.

So, in balance, what I said, even to the *New York Times* in advance of the war was, you know, probably make Iraq a more humane place, but the world a much more dangerous place, I think. And again, I apologize if I told you that before.

So, it would put one in a terrible situation, if you simultaneously understood the brutality of the regime.

The other thing I would say is that, thinking about Hussein, the way I talked about it back then was that there were two [axes], also, to measure his behavior: one was how he treated his own people, and whether that rose to a level of extremity that warranted, you know, running these risks on all these axes, right? And you know, just in other words, if it was a clear and present danger; you know, systematic genocide against his own people, maybe I would have, you know, melted away, because you would have just thought, anything to help all the Kurds or, you know, the Shia, whoever would have been targeted.

But, it was — what you had was, for me, anyway, was you had a genocide that had been carried out in '87, '88, and you had, that was predictive of his capacity for doing those kinds of things. But you had one of the worst tyrannies on the earth. That's what you had, unquestionably. But, just again, as somebody who is generally ill-disposed to intervention but believes there are certain circumstances that occasionally it's required, it seemed to be that tyranny put it in a different — even tyranny with a kind of predictive genocidal background, etcetera, put it in a different place than something like a Rwanda, or

even a Bosnia, or even a Kosovo, [funnily] enough, because – and that – Kosovo is, to me, just scored differently [onto] the axes, maybe ‘cause I was biased ‘cause I was there, but also because Slobodan Milosevic also had a similar track record that was predictive. But he then began killing and cleansing in 1999, not, late 1998 and 1999, in a way where the predictive stuff sort of came up, but it felt anticipatorily relevant that he had just, you know, done [UI] and done these things, and then was doing something that seemed comparable, you know, rounding people up, and so forth, again.

So, that cut differently to me, more of where NATO was at stake, where I felt that the, you know, the future of the alliance was also at stake in a way that on the strategic fronts seemed like a [cutting favor] of stopping him.

But in any event, the inconsistencies in these positions are obvious.

So there was the tyranny axis, and then there was the national security axis, or weapons, or the genocide axis, of which he was in the orange, but not in the red. And then there was the national security era, the weapons of mass destruction, which it was in the kind of, I didn't understand; that was never dispositive or, it just was never seen as sufficient impetus.

And for people like Michael Ignatieff, my colleague here, I think what he, I don't know if you would put it this way, but my read on him was, two orange axes makes a red axis, you know. But to me, it was two orange axes, because the red on either would have also potentially changed the global dynamic, you know. Also, you would have potentially had more support, and more front-end buy-in and so forth.

In any event, all this is irrelevant to what I would have done.

So all I knew that, was that it didn't seem like the right thing to go to war with these two criteria, and then with this other spillover effects and the negative consequences.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So those judgments were such that even if the administration and power had not been the Bush administration — if there had been the Clinton administration, the Gore administration, the Barack Obama administration — that you would have felt that even if the impetus

behind a decision to go to war had been more carefully considered, more humane, more attentive to international norms, etcetera, that you still think that it would not have been a good idea?

SAMANTHA POWER: I don't know. I don't think that that's a thought experiment that one can do, or even should do, really, because, I mean, that imagined world would have been such a different world, on all those different axes, you know. In other words, you know, what would the regional relationship to that have looked like, you know, if Bill Clinton had gone – I mean I'm not carrying Bill Clinton's water, but had gone prostate, you know, to the – prostrate, whatever the expression is, you know, to the region and, you know, tried to solicit, you know, created a regional conference to talk about what to do after Saddam Hussein. Or, you know, I mean it just is so – I think everything is inextricably linked.

And indeed, even the Bush administration, imagine the Bush administration, just imagine if he'd come in and said, you know, I'm big oil, I'm Texas, but I'm gonna do Kyoto, I think, I believe in Kyoto. Or I'm on the, you know, I'm the international [UI]. I mean it would just, imagine even if he had just done benign neglect towards these things; if he had just maintained the Clinton administration's positions; I think you actually would have probably seen a very different response in the Security Council. I don't think he would have gotten over some of the empirical humps that some of the countries are putting forward. But you certainly would have seen the second resolution. You would have had the Chileans and the Mexicans and some of the others who, you know, wouldn't have had anything to do with it.

So, you know, and then why does that matter? Well it matters both because of one of those axes of the rules of the road, the international order; but it also matters – I mean one thing I was also familiar with, although I didn't write about this, or it wasn't as clear in my mind; it was like lush, but then it did sort of come up, and I should have made this argument better or more forcefully.

But, you know, the one thing of studying Sergio's life and, you know, doing some of the, sort of those conflict stuff in the past was just how hard this kind of work is, even under the best of

circumstances. And, you know, watching, you know, multinational contingents of all kinds just founder in East Timor, you know, like a half island, like little blip.

And so, I would have always probably had some concern about the post-conflict period, but that wasn't what was on – it was more just, like I said, I mean, I thought it would make Iraq a more humane place. I just thought they would have taken a lot of that into account, even though it was very clear that they held the U.N. in contempt at every level, not just at the legitimacy level, but also very crucially — and I wrote [about it then] — I mean this comes out, I think, very clearly in the book, the Sergio book, is, they held it in contempt operationally.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Well, with some justice, I think.

SAMANTHA POWER: Well, not in retrospect, really. Because, like, when you – I mean this is what I think.

When you take this sort of – you have to ask the "compared to what" question, you know, of – and what we do is we go in and we want to create, in the wake of these things we do well. Like, we do the fighting; not just us, but I mean even, you know, NATO in the Kosovo context or whatever, like, countries do fighting well. Like, soldiers are very clear what they're up to. They don't do it without civilian casualties, and they make mistakes, and so forth, but they're at least within their bailiwick.

And then there's this set of things that come after, you know, that we don't do well in our own inner cities, and [UI] now expect to be able do in something, you know, which is to make people want to go to school instead of take up guns, you know, or to rebuild or to do, you know, to create public health infrastructures and so forth.

So you're right; it's like not without justification. But it's also, it's this delta between our expectations for what we can, you know, kind of mold in our own liberal democratic image, and then where these countries are sort of coming from.

I mean, and I have those expectations too, believe me. But I'm now just more, just older, you know, just more aware of, it's so hard. And so, in retrospect, when you look at – I mean what the U.N. buys you is that sort of just a greater grace period, really. You just get slightly less skepticism upfront.

Nobody's asking, are you occupiers or liberators right at the start. But even now, what I know now that I wouldn't have known in 2002 is even [Sergio] and East Timor is like the height of the non-Brazilian, Brazilian, you know, multinational guy who's just there to try to make it better. Ego and all the flaws and so forth of course there, but even he was challenged as an occupier, you know, because at a certain point, if you not delivering those concrete dividends.

All this to say that on the eve of the war, what was really hard was to say, this course is the wrong course, and to be able to say so little about what the right course would be.

[I left] the weapons of mass destruction to somebody else, but on the tyranny axis, what in fact is gonna change life for Iraqis? This seems, on balance, to be doing more harm than good, generally; this approach that is being pursued by President Bush.

But nobody told a story, you know, about what would be a constructive alternative, either to deal with the weapons problem – and here's where one just continues to run up – I run up against brick walls, and this why I've resisted your question a little bit.

But we kept talking about Iraq à la carte, you know, as if the answers to Iraq, or even the rightness of the Bush invasion of Iraq, could be settled; that there was some right and noble answer there that had everything to do with what Iraq was like.

Now we know — thanks in part to your film and others — we should have been considering understanding a ton more about Iraq and a ton more about the intervener. That is now very, very obvious. But we also have to look like more – in order to know whether Iraq was the right thing we have to look outside of Iraq to know whether it was the right thing. In order to know what to have done about tyranny in Iraq and to be an engine for that as a country, you know, we had to systemically be changing the way we're doing our business in the world.

And so it left you as an advocate without a tool, you know, for, if we're talking about regional diplomacy, if we're talking about human rights monitors in addition – that was one of the things I proposed at the time was, here we're, everybody's talking about getting the weapons inspectors again.

Like, why don't we actually talk about the human condition in this country, you know, and who's gonna talk about it?

Well, it can't be the United States. Sort of like Darfur today. I mean it's incredible anti-genocide movement in this country on Darfur. It's amazing. And it's like nothing I ever would have dreamed of. And yet they're all dressed up with no place to go, because the worst thing for Darfur, almost, other than what they're living, is George Bush being their advocate in the international system. And that's not a partisan point; that's, literally, he cannot summon resources because of the level of anti-Americanism.

And the same was sort of true at the time, was that you could sort of jeer up all these ideas about how – somehow you could, [how do we] get a region that's insensitive to human rights to care about the conditions within Iraq? How are you gonna get the Chinese, who just started to flex their muscles in 2002 on the Security Council to want to look inside a country, you know, where sovereignty is – you know they want to maintain sovereignty as a barrier to anybody else's scrutiny?

You know, so it's like there was no place to go, it felt like. And then there was the Europeans who were, you know, I mean, had it not been Iraq, it would have been something else. They were desperate, one felt, to stand up to Bush, the Bush administration, on something. They were desperate to litigate all of the affronts that had been old Europe, new Europe, and etcetera. It wasn't about – it didn't feel like it was about Iraq for them, either. It certainly didn't feel like it had anything to do with the Iraqis.

So I don't know if there's an answer, because I felt the system was comprised of like broken or self-interested parts that couldn't be configured in a way to actually tend to whatever the, you know, national security threat was and the green to orange at best.

So, and I thought – but maybe not green but chemical weapons, that seemed obvious, cause he'd used them. But, and then the tyranny thing; it seemed like a Robert Mugabe problem, you know, and that, look how well we're doing on the Robert Mugabe problem.

So you know, that's – if you would have heard me at the time, just talking like this, sort of pathetically, not really ending up anywhere, because it was like, you can't. So then you end up saying, what am I for, this status quo? Jesus, has it come to that?

But it just felt like integration and, you know, rather than this tear up the envelope of the world. It just felt like some kind of – I mean, no one had talked about human rights in Iraq, you know, maybe ever, at a state and an interstate level. So it seemed like on the one hand it was this calamity and this quagmire at every turn, not knowing kind of where to go, 'cause there didn't seem to be any good faith actors in the world. But then it was also a moment where everyone was paying attention to Iraq.

We had, you know, other than the Bush administration sort of cynically using the welfare of Iraqis to justify what they were planning to do for other reasons, no one in the alternative camp was telling a story about – like I mean the containment camp, let's say — the Steve [Walt] and John [Meerscheimer] camp — they weren't telling a story about what containment would mean for the real live people in the country.

So, it's a therapy session.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. What about prospectively?

SAMANTHA POWER: You mean now, or? Well, I always had empirical problems with Iraq. My problem is I don't believe – I'm incredibly frustrated by one assertion meeting another assertion at present about the consequences. I mean, it goes without saying that the assertions by the Bush administration are un-credible because of past assertions. And even those of Petraeus; I mean, I trust Petraeus in a range of ways because of his role in the counterinsurgency [manual], 'cause I know him a little bit through [Sarah Sewell], our director here at the Center, where she worked, was mentored by Walt Slocombe; and now paired with Petraeus in writing the forward to the counterinsurgency manual.

But, so these assertions of today, right, I mean, that the military presence is achieving this or that; met by much more manifestly absurd to me [assertions] on the other side, which is, you know, our presence is causing all of the harm, and once we leave, things will be fine for Iraqis. I mean I'm caricaturing, terribly. But I am not convinced that staying is making life better for Iraqis. And I know

that staying is having pernicious consequences on our ability to do anything else in the world. But I know that leaving is not something that wipes the slate clean, as some people seem to suggest. And the way we leave, the pace at which we leave, the bloodshed that follows leaving, is gonna have just those same consequences, in other words.

So very much like the before period, I mean, my position is that we should announce that we are withdrawing. I mean, my position mirrors, I suppose, that of Obama; announce that we are withdrawing on a specific, I mean giving people much, much, much in the way of fair notice. As you know, there are already internal checkpoints, you know, government to government. I mean, people can't even move internally right now.

So as part of the withdrawal strategy that has civilian protection as its centerpiece, you announce this date. You basically work as best you can with the authorities, as obstinate as they are, to facilitate...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Safe transfers.

SAMANTHA POWER: ...safe transfers and movement. You drastically increase, of course, the number of refugees you let into this country, like you do a, I mean, Obama this year called for 2 billion dollars to neighboring countries. I don't have to tell you, but its 2 million people now in neighboring countries and almost no extra bilateral assistance given to either Jordan or Syria or Lebanon. It's, I mean, Syria, obviously, but Jordan – yeah, I think Syria should get bilateral assistance for what they're doing.

Anyway, so you deal with the 2million you're at, you're talking about 6 million Sunni are the people who are most vulnerable. I mean, Shiite territory, you're going back to some version of militant tyranny and intertribal conflicts and assassinations and all of that. But it's really the Sunni population that is the most, that is gonna be rendered the most vulnerable.

But you know, one of the things I said 10 minutes ago is just how very hard everything is. It's so very hard. What is incredibly frustrating about this very polarized debate about, let's stay, we're gonna turn around; if we leave, the Iraqis will be better off, by definition. It is to...

CHARLES FERGUSON: How about [UI] if we leave there'll be a kind of huge bloodbath.

SAMANTHA POWER: Yeah, well, yeah, but that's what I'm saying is that by not, that is a risk of leaving. I mean, in other words, it's unknown. I mean, George, in his current piece, asserts the bloodbath that will follow, and quotes people asserting the bloodbath that will follow. It's an assertion. Any assertion by someone who wants to get out that a bloodbath won't follow is also an assertion. These are totally unknowable things.

So given, A, the political calendar here and the strategic impatience as Petraeus might say, on, domestically; and the fact that this is happening; and the world, in its own way, is demanding it happen, although the world is embedding in its demand a responsible withdrawal; I think we should be spending, you know, what little leverage we have – because it's not like we control events; it's not like we're mitigating the harms that are anticipated. I mean, I agree that they can be worse, always. But to be actually focusing, for the first damn time since the war started, on Iraqis.

Like, it's still our debate in this country, and our military debate is not about Iraqis. And by pretending that in January '09 the next president isn't gonna, you know, begin a withdrawal, we're just – I mean, I [just think] depriving them of the information they need and the resources they need to make their decisions in different ways; and depriving us of the capacity to actually think through what sort of contiguous sectarian territories, in our absence, are gonna look like.

So I don't think we've even – like as hard as it is to say this is the way forward, that will automatically stave off bloodbath or, you know, prevent an Al Qaeda foothold; we talk lots. I mean, the governments talk – this government talks an awful lot about Al Qaeda and an Iranian influence, of course. But nobody's rolled up their sleeves to actually say, what would a responsible withdrawal look like that would leave the most, you know, mixed neighborhoods last, that would bring civilians with you as far as you go, that would get, you know, safe haven for people in neighboring countries.

I mean, I grant that this is all Alice in Wonderland, like, wishful, it's a form of wishful thinking. But at least it's grappling with – I mean, George would say exactly what I'm saying, but say, therefore stay. In other words, we have that moral duty to stay, almost no matter what. Like, let's build a constituency. And he would put it in this piece, you know. Declare if, in Vietnam I think he put it – as

he put, it was, in Vietnam, it was declare victory and leave. And George turned that on his head and said, declare defeat and stay.

But you know what it's like over there. I mean, the logistic tale on what amount to counterinsurgency operations, you know, a lot of the time; the training, and who's actually doing the training, versus who's sort of back manning the fort.

I mean, I'm not convinced by those people who assert that we're the last thing between bloodbath and – I'm not convinced by them, but I also would never be dogmatic, that the violence won't go up, like in certain – I mean like, I just have to imagine that in certain neighborhoods, you know, U.S. forces are sort of the last people standing between you know, basically, militia and civilian massacres.

So I just think, like, let's talk about civilian massacres. Let's, you know, think about the things internally that can be done so that people get fair notice and hopefully get to live...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Several Iraqis have suggested to me recently that the United States support a military coup. And these are not, you know, in general, silly people; and it's not the first thing, certainly, that comes to their minds or their lips. But they think that the situation is so desperate now that – and the degree of kind of warlord chaos is such that...

Then when I raise that idea to other people, the response, for the most part, has not been, you know, moral outrage. It's just been, that's not possible anymore, because the military is no longer a unified, coherent force. It's, you know, controlled by SCIRI, by various Shiite militias, partially by the central government. You know, there's no there there.

SAMANTHA POWER: [UI] This is a – there's still a notion – I mean, I hate [UI] American rhetoric, too, about the debate; Maliki must do, Maliki – there's no question Maliki is beholden to elements — well, I shouldn't say there's no question — it seems that though Maliki is clearly beholden to, you know, Iranian elements and that he's not serious about an Iraqi identity and he's not serious about seeing integration. Fair enough. But the idea that if he were serious, that this is some genie that can be put in a bottle.

I mean, we all have a, there's a, in the American debate, the way Biden talks about partition and so forth, you know, there's like such a solipsism to it, you know. It's as if – and George, again, I think, alludes at this a little bit. But it's as if, if the United States only decided that, decided that partition is the right thing, you know, we just get to, you know, do what they did at, you know, after, you know, Versailles and just sort of move some ethnic groups around. I mean that requires – that would require, you know, 600,000, 700,000 U.S. troops. And even then, you know, you're not gonna succeed in...

So similarly, there's a kind of statism – so there's the solipsism, I think, of us, as Americans, thinking that we wave our magic wand one way or the other; we just need to decide what we really want and if we want Maliki to do this, you know, he must do this, and [UI] [UI] very credible [to the] country.

And then there's the, you know, the statism of it, which is some idea that we would project our own national experience on other countries, you know, and expect a head of state to be able to – [no one] [UI] in this country, if the President wants something he can generally – well, do we? We could dream; I don't know. Who knows what their doing anymore?

But the fact of the matter is we, I think, really know so very little, and can't kind of integrate undergoverned or ungoverned spaces into our minds, or you know, fiefdom structures [UI]. I just don't think – I think all of our policy tools are oriented, all diplomats are trained in, you know, dealing with states, and we have these models and black boxes or billiard balls, you know, bumping up against, you're taught at schools like this. And, you know, I think Iraqis, too. I mean, that was what was amazing — I think your film shows this, too — is at the beginning, the way you know, so many of them assume that the looting was on purpose; you know, that the United States, you know...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Everything was on purpose.

SAMANTHA POWER: Everything was on purpose, right? And so a coup would have to make a difference because, you know, this leader has brought, or in this leader's presence, such balance has ensued, and therefore another leader might bring you – but I think that train has left the station. Doesn't mean there wouldn't be a better leader out there; but it's hard to think of one who fits the [UI]

diagram right. Who's the leader that has sufficient legitimacy, that the Shiite majority, can work with the Kurds [UI] [UI] [UI] this whole thing long-term probably, [UI] armed Shia. But, you know, where can you find that overlap such that you don't forfeit your legitimacy and credibility in the Shiite community as you begin to try to integrate, or try to work more carefully with the Sunni? I don't know who [that] [is]. If there's a noble person out there like that, then fine, maybe talk about a coup.

But it seems again to exaggerate the idea that this has a – that there's a silver bullet somewhere out there, that there's some [maybe] bronze, copper bullet that will, you know, change the basic dynamic.

What do you think? [UI]

CHARLES FERGUSON: I think roughly you're right.

SAMANTHA POWER: Less angst; more clarity [UI] [UI] [UI].

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah, I tend to think that the train has left the station.