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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Dexter Filkins: *The Forever War*

1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW, 1 October 2008, 4pm

The Wilson Center hosted New York Times foreign correspondent **Dexter Filkins** to discuss his new book on his experiences reporting from Afghanistan and Iraq, *The Forever War*. The event was moderated by **Robert Litwak**, Director of the International Security Studies Program at the Wilson Center.

Dexter Filkins began by saying that his book does not offer editorial arguments or policy prescriptions. His aim was to give a visceral sense of being in Iraq and Afghanistan over the course of the last 10 years.

He described his time in Afghanistan in 1998, before the Taliban was on the U.S. national security radar. He said the civilization was thoroughly destroyed after twenty years of war. He noted that however horrific rule under the Taliban was, it was even worse before. The Taliban began with righteous and noble intentions before becoming corrupted. **By 2000, Arabs had infiltrated the country, radicalizing the movement. They opened training camps and madrassas that were full of foreign kids yelling about jihad.** Immediately after the 2001 U.S. invasion there was a period of euphoria in which women in the villages threw off their burkhas and men shaved their beards. **The U.S. reinvigorated the Northern Alliance supply lines and decimated the Taliban forces with air bombing.**

Filkins said the situation in Afghanistan today is very bad, and there is no apparent solution. **He said Iraq surge model will not translate to Afghanistan.** In the tribal areas the terrain is much too difficult, and would require a million troops to pacify. And there is little chance of an ‘awakening’ among the Pashtun tribes, because they have been wiped out by the Taliban. **He said that much of the resistance now is not religious but nationalistic and ethnic.**

He then discussed Iraq, and his experience in Baghdad the day the regime fell. He said by the next morning the looting had started, and by the afternoon the whole city was out of control. **He said one could feel the air let out of the entire enterprise within 6 hours. Filkins noted that the Americans were not at all prepared for the insurgency, and would enter a town and arrest every war-aged male, which quickly radicalized the population.**

He said the surge is working and the change he saw in the country is extraordinary. In 2006 Ramadi looked like Dresden or Grozny, and now U.S. troops don’t even carry guns or wear helmets. **He attributes the success to the new counterinsurgency strategy as well as overreach by al-Qaeda.** He said the Mahdi Army was hit very hard and deeply chastened by the recent government crackdown. Filkins concluded by calling the Sunni Awakening “very fragile” as its command is transferred to the Iraqi government.