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Samantha Power

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Time described Samantha Power as the new conscience of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and named her one of 100 top scientists and thinkers of '04. The Harvard-trained attorney is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, human rights advocate and international law scholar, who started her career reporting on wars in the former Yugoslavia. Power was the founding exec director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, where she's currently a professor, and is a foreign policy advisor to Sen. Obama.

Journalist explains why she chose to write about the late U.N. High Commissioner Sergio de Mello in her new book *Chasing the Flame*. (3:54)

Tavis: Samantha Power is an acclaimed writer and journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction for her book, "A Problem from Hell." Her latest is called "Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World." She's also written the introduction for a new book of photography about Darfur, a fundraising project called "Darfur/Darfur: Life/War."

Samantha, nice to have you on the program.

Samantha Power: Great to be here.

Tavis: Let me start with the Darfur book. I want to come to the "Chasing the Flame" in a moment. Set that down for a second. Start with this Darfur book. First of all, it's a beautiful book. I don't know if Jonathan can see this. Cover it, Jonathan, one second, though. I want to show this cover here. There you go. It slides out. So it's a beautiful book of photography. Tell me how you got involved in this and what we're doing with this.

Power: Well, basically, the world's top photographers, many of whom risked their lives in order to get photos of what the Janjaweed, the Sudanese militia, are doing in Darfur to try to capture the loss of dignity for the people who have actually managed to survive the slaughter of Darfur.

These photographers decided to give their photographs away, which is not something many of them can afford to do, but for the sake of actually raising money for a school in Darfur and, of course, in order to raise awareness in order to help strengthen the movement in this country that's been so vocal in order to get the Bush administration to do more.

Tavis: It seems adolescent to say, but it never ceases to amaze me the power that rests in a particular photograph.

Power: Yeah. I mean, as a wordsmith, as one who trades in words, we got nothing on those people. I

mean, what they can capture in a flash, in an instant, is so very powerful. One of the things that worries me about the ascent of the internet, not to get off topic, but, of course, you have to click on the internet on "The New York Times" page in order to open a photograph.

Whereas the capacity of people to just stumble into new knowledge in a place like Darfur or on Congo is much greater, of course, when we're still reading newspapers and magazines and so forth. So I just hope that photographs retain their power of serendipitous galvanization.

Tavis: At this point in the process, give me your sense of where we are on the issue of Darfur with regard to progress or the lack thereof.

Power: Well, I mean, on the one hand, the good news is, we have never seen anything like, in the history of the United States of America, the movement that has grown up around Darfur, around stopping genocide. I mean, if the lesson of the twentieth century was politicians will never own this kind of issue naturally or eagerly, what citizens have done is say, "Okay, well, we get it. That's how the system works. Now we have to make them own it," young people who invented the system of giving out genocide grades for members of Congress.

You actually have members of Congress now scrambling around saying, "I have a D- on genocide. How do I get a B?" So you have a lot of activity that's been extracted from the Bush administration in terms of funding for humanitarian aid, three billion dollars the administration has spent; a referral of [inaudible] International Criminal Court which the Bush administration doesn't like all that much that was very much responsive to the movement; and the authorization of a peacekeeping force to go to Darfur.

The trouble is, of course, the U.S. doesn't have quite the credibility it once had in international institutions, so when it's against genocide on a Monday, for water-boarding on a Tuesday, when it shows up on a Wednesday and asks for troops, people basically, you know, assume that it must be motivated by something else like oil or counter-terrorism and so forth.

So it hasn't had much luck summoning resources from other countries and those other countries should be ashamed because they themselves aren't putting forth police or peacekeepers or other things. So right now, you have nine thousand troops in Darfur and we await the arrival of seventeen thousand others to actually protect civilians.

Tavis: Well, we'll put this gorgeous product away, so here we come back to the second text, "Chasing the Flame." Sergio Vieira de Mello was who?

Power: He was a guy who was previewed for me by a colleague in Bosnia as a cross between James Bond on the one hand and Bobby Kennedy on the other, which was quite unusual in the U.N. system to find somebody who had that advance billing. But he was a guy who lived his entire career which would prove to be thirty-four years in the world's most broken places.

So whether places like Darfur that had major atrocities, genocide and so forth being carried out, or failing states, or under-governed places like Afghanistan, like Iraq, in fact, he moved with the headlines. In the 1970s, the wars of decolonization in Africa and elsewhere were all the rage, he was the guy sent to Sudan. He was the person sent to Mozambique to actually shepherd independence through from a humanitarian standpoint.

In the early 1980s, Palestinians were using the U.N. based in southern Lebanon to stage attacks into Israel. Israel then attacked and invaded Lebanon. He was the guy literally standing between the Palestinians and the Israelis. He was in Beirut when the U.S. Embassy was hit by the first ever suicide bomber. I met him in the 1990s after the wall fell.

He was the first person to go and negotiate with the Khmer Rouge, one of the most monstrous regimes in history. I met him, of course, in Bosnia. Then he went to Rwanda and to Congo. In the late 1990s, we began experimenting with so-called nation building. He was the viceroy, the guy that the U.N. put in charge over Kosovo and then East Tibor.

Then, of course, with 9/11, the big issue on the international stage is how do you balance freedom or liberty on the one hand and security on the other with terrorists out there, but also with the need to maintain adherence to our values? He was the U.N. human rights commissioner figuring out how to deal with the Bush administration, how to deal with the Geneva Convention's repudiation and so forth. Do you denounce? Do you get in the room? Do you try to convince?

Then, of course, tragically, he was the person who really moved with the headlines in that he was the one sent to Iraq to try to do damage control after the U.S. invasion for the sake of the Iraqis and also for the sake of rehabilitating the U.N. which was feeling very vulnerable after the Bush administration bypassed it in order to go to war.

But basically, you can't make this life up. We're so groping, or at least I find myself groping, for guidance, you know, in the twenty-first century to think about how to deal with not just twentieth century states squaring off against one another, but non-state actors, rebels, the question of evil, when to use military force. These are the questions he dealt with for an entire career.

Tavis: Aside from the obvious which is that he had obviously an extensive resume that you now detailed for us, beyond the resume, the reason for highlighting the work of somebody who most of us by name had never heard of is what?

Power: I think that we don't have many shepherds right now. A lot of our models for how we think about who to look to for guidance are old models. They're ones that, you know, entail sort of battleships squaring off against one another, heads of state, celebrities or whatever.

Here's a guy who's literally working in the muck for thirty-four years. He's almost never at headquarters, never in an office. He's actually out there thinking about broken people and broken places.

My feeling is, from the standpoint of going forward as a country and a citizen in a country, if we don't figure out how to enhance dignity of how people are living abroad, be a part of that project, if we don't figure out how to free ourselves from fear - one thing Sergio used to say is, "Fear is a bad adviser" - and the degree to which we lunge when we are afraid.

We lunge for the extremes for the most part, not just us in this country, but people in Afghanistan, in Iraq and so forth. They go to the margins, right, instead of going to the center. So I think we as an international community have to do better and we have to mobilize resources around these global challenges.

He had a thirty-four year head start thinking about these questions. Most of us are just kind of turning to them now and saying, "All right. Well, now we're going to have to make our mistakes in the twenty-first century." Wouldn't it be better to learn from the mistakes he made and try not to make them and kind of preempt in a way?

Tavis: You and I have not spent a lot of time together, but I suspect we probably agree, given what I'm hearing you suggest now, that an individual, one person, can make a difference. Yet I want to juxtapose that reality of one person being able to make a significant difference with the world that we live today and the fact that it requires states and international bodies and governments to do the kind of work that has to be done to bring that dignity to people en masse.

What I'm trying to get at is whether or not the message here really ought to be that one person can make the difference or the challenge is to the system, to the body politic, raising up a life like de Mello's. Does that make sense?

Power: It couldn't make more sense. I mean, it is a brilliant question and it's exactly in a way the challenge that one man or you or I or any of us who are trying to make the world just a little bit different are up against. There are all these structural forces and these behemoths and domestic political calculi and so forth.

I think what Sergio shows you, though, is the degree to which institutions themselves, of course, are also comprised of individuals and those individuals are themselves persuadable. In other words, if we imagine -

I mean, let's fantasize that an Obama administration or whoever comes next decides to make dignity something we think about in any policy discussion about how we do our business abroad maybe as a constraint on state power, but also as a galvanizer of resources.

Sergio was a guy who could go door-to-door and make that case. He would have just come back from the world's worst places, just been shot at, just survived this or that. He had a credibility and he had a capacity to talk, to find a kind of common ground. Even when he met with President Bush, instead of coming in and shrilly denouncing Guantanamo or whatever, he actually boasted about the fact that he had a shoot-to-kill policy in East Tibor, which sounds dreadful, I know.

But in peacekeeping, too often peacekeepers have been very, very passive in the face of incursions on the very rights that they are there to promote. So I think what you see with Sergio is, on the one hand, you see like the U.N. system - I mean, Richard Holbrook says about the U.N. that blaming the U.N. is like blaming Madison Square Garden when the Knicks play badly. You're blaming a building.

Then, into that building, you have a hundred ninety-two countries and then you have this guy, Sergio, coming back and saying like Oliver Twist, you know, "Can I have some more, please? Can I have some troops? Can I have some police? Can I have some money? Can I have some shelter? I want to go bring that on the road." What has to happen, I think, is that citizens in those countries, especially in democracies, have to orient their governments around the kind of priorities that Sergio had.

Then what you'll see is a marriage between the people who live in the field and in the world, people like Sergio if we can ever replace him, and the priorities of states which fundamentally are comprised of individuals who have opinions about what priorities should be. But I think citizens, as we see from the anti-genocide movement, can create new perceptions of priorities, new perceptions of interests and that's what we have to work to in this new century.

Tavis: Let me offer this as an exit question. It seems to me that, if we're going to, to your earlier suggestion, create more people like Sergio, and there are certainly many others around the world like him, if we're going to find or to create people like him, it begs the question as to what drives people. What drives people like Sergio Vieira de Mello?

Power: Well, the title of the book is "Chasing the Flame" and there's no question that one part of it for him was a bit of an adrenalin junkie, war junkie and there are people like that. It's a genre of human in the world today with all disaster zones. He kept gravitating toward them. He would get very restless back behind a desk. But the other piece of "Chasing the Flame" is that set of principles, that set of ideals.

He was a Brazilian by birth and his father was a Brazilian diplomat who was forced into retirement by the Brazilian military junta that took over the coups. I think that instilled in Sergio a sense that, A, politics mattered, but, B, that politics was something to be mistrusted and could be very promiscuous and could have a terrible toll on human life and on families and so forth. I think that stayed with him.

He had an amazing ability - and this is very unusual for people even who talk about human rights - to disaggregate the human in human rights or disaggregate the human in humanitarian. He actually was not perfect. He made a huge number of mistakes, as we all would, but found a way to actually see individuals. They were visible to him around him. They weren't just abstractions. So I think that, then, the more exposure he got to suffering, it became deeply personal to him.

Tavis: She is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize. Her name is Samantha Power. Her latest book is called "Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World." Samantha, nice to have you on the program.

Power: Thanks for having me.

Tavis: My pleasure.