

against the tiny island of Melos, which fielded scarcely 500. The Melians asked Athens's envoys to respect their neutrality, and got this response before they were slaughtered: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." The Athenians, Blackburn says, showed precisely the sort of dispassionate self-governance that Plato associates with justice. Yet they acted unjustly, and were none the worse for it.

Blackburn's criticisms don't end there. Plato's ideal rulers are philosopher-kings who make Blackburn shudder—probably because he knows what despots ruling in the name of wisdom have done. "In so far as Plato has a legacy in politics," he writes, "it includes theocracy . . . , militarism, nationalism, hierarchy, illiberalism, totalitarianism, and the complete disdain of the economic structures of society."

If its argument fails and its politics frighten, why, in the words of Plato scholar M. F. Burnyeat, is there "always someone somewhere . . . reading the *Republic*"? Perhaps for the same reason that someone is always looking at the sun. Both are enormous and abiding, absolutely of this world yet alien to it. And both are things of beauty.

Many remember the *Republic's* haunting metaphor of the cave, to which Blackburn devotes several chapters. But for my money, the *Republic's* beauty arrives more casually. When, for example, Socrates senses a friend growing weary during the discussion, he urges, "We must station ourselves like hunters surrounding a wood and concentrate our minds, so that our quarry, justice, does not vanish into obscurity."

Blackburn calls this "tedious dramatic buildup." Others call it poetry. Blackburn is a philosopher whom John McCain might like—straight-talkin', no-nonsense. This sensibility suits tartly argued earlier books by Blackburn such as *Truth: A Guide* (2005) and *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (2001), but he can't quite figure out what to make of the *Republic*. Still, he is awed by the purity of Plato's demand that we change our lives. In the end, he can't help but admire what Virginia Woolf called

"the love of truth which draw[s] Socrates and us in his wake to the summit where, if we too may stand for a moment, it is to enjoy the greatest felicity of which we are capable."

—Brendan Boyle

The Ambassadors

FAITHFUL SERVICE TO HER Majesty's government earned British diplomat Carne Ross the privilege of being a well-placed pawn during the disastrous exercise in Anglo-American self-deception that became the Iraq war. But he

atoned brilliantly in 2004, testifying before a British commission about how intelligence reports were misused to fabricate an Iraqi threat to the United Kingdom. He then resigned from the civil service to found Independent Diplomat, an international organization that supplies diplomatic expertise to not-quite-states such as Kosovo and Somaliland.

In his memoir, Ross describes with elegant humility his 15-year apprenticeship in the British diplomatic service. The Foreign Office recruits presentable generalists. With no formal training even in diplomatic protocol, they must cope with trade policies, centrifuge technology, and knotty issues in international law. Despite the State Department's vastly larger size and budget, U.S. diplomats are expected to do much the same, so Ross's book is a fine introduction to the diplomatic profession for American readers.

The best portions of *Independent Diplomat* are drawn from Ross's years at United Nations headquarters, where he served from 1997 to 2002. There he was tasked with defending UN sanctions on Iraq against charges that they had caused the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children. Those sanctions were imposed to compel Saddam Hussein to destroy his chemical and biological stockpiles and dismantle his nuclear program. High-level defectors confirmed that by 1996 he had

**INDEPENDENT
DIPLOMAT:**
Dispatches
From an Unac-
countable Elite.

By Carne Ross. Cornell
Univ. Press. 243 pp. \$25

done so. But by the time Ross arrived for his assignment, the presence or absence of “weapons of mass destruction” no longer figured in policy discussions. Washington demanded that sanctions continue until Saddam’s regime fell. As the faithful servant of a loyal U.S. ally, Ross crafted diplomatic doublespeak to prevent Iraqi reality from undermining U.S. policy.

In 2002, Ross took a sabbatical to study political philosophy on a fellowship at the New School University. There, he learned the rudiments of epistemology. Thus armed, he posits that his UN discussions were so detached from the real world because they were confined to a narrow subset of linguistic terms. Further, he concludes that diplomats are ignorant, arrogant, and unaccountable, and should be replaced by supranational parliamentary bodies and by direct negotiation between “lifelong experts” who understand their state’s interests on the issues they study better than any diplomatic generalist could.

If Ross had consulted primatologists instead of philosophers, he might have reached a less bleak verdict on his profession. At bottom,

civil servants are social primates. They derive happiness from their standing within a competitive hierarchy. Parroting conventional belief is prudent proof of loyalty. In the competition for status, discordant facts (e.g., that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction) cripple their possessor. Most diplomats, therefore, edit their perceptions ruthlessly.

But societies do not survive long without accurate information about potential threats. A few genuine diplomats—and Ross was on the road to becoming one when he resigned—are tolerated for their ability to shed their social blinders and observe the foreigners around them. Through personal relationships built on mutual trust, they trade the information needed to craft politically viable alliances against common dangers.

Despite his conclusion that the diplomatic profession ought to be abolished, Ross’s own organization presupposes the value of diplomats’ skills. Perhaps even he would agree that only in rare moments of exceptional self-government is self-immolation the most honorable option for an experienced diplomat.

—John Brady Kiesling

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