



Jere Van Dyk Interviews Milton Viorst

Jere Van Dyk , Milton Viorst

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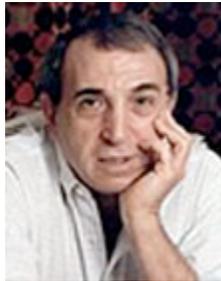
[Jere Van Dyk](#)

JERE VAN DYK, CARNEGIE COUNCIL: This is Jere Van Dyk. Welcome to the Carnegie Council.

This morning we are fortunate to have with us a distinguished historian, journalist, correspondent, Milton Viorst, longtime writer for *The Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*.

He has written a new book called [Storm From the East](#). It's just out, published by Random House. We are very fortunate this morning to have an opportunity to sit down and talk with him.

Thank you, Mr. Viorst.



[Milton Viorst](#)

MILTON VIORST: Thank you. It's nice to be here.

JERE VAN DYK: It's a fascinating book, very timely. Succinctly and elegantly written. What do you think is the most important point that you want to make in this book?

MILTON VIORST: The point I'm trying to make more than anything else is that this is not a new war. It's the latest chapter in a war that has been going on between two great cultures, Islamic Eastern and the Christian West, for 1,400 years. It started when Muhammad overthrew the Christian empire in North Africa and Asia Minor. With interruptions—up and down, and in and out—basically, it has been going on over all of these years. It has taken slightly different forms, with the Ottoman Empire replacing the Arabs. But, basically, it's the same war, and Iraq is the latest chapter.

It just seems to me too bad that the president didn't understand that—or maybe he did. Maybe at some level of his consciousness—and I don't totally rule this out—he thinks of himself as an heir to the Crusaders. I think he's a deeply believing Christian, and I think that he holds that evangelical view that his Christianity is something he has a duty to promote, to convey to others. I think it's quite possible that there is a significant element of this in his decision to take such an active role as he has in the Middle East.

JERE VAN DYK: When Islam came to Muhammad and he began to conquer, you said in your speech, which was fascinating, that he conquered what was then the Christian world. What we have here now, as you have just said, is a continuation, in some ways, of this competition between Christianity and Islam. Is that true?

MILTON VIORST: Not the whole Christian world, because, although his forces invaded Europe, both in the east and the west, the Christian world was not destroyed. What I said was that the Christian world that existed along the coast of the Mediterranean, both the southern coast and up as far as Byzantium—that was the Christian world. That was a very important part of the Christian world, you remember. That's where Paul came from.

JERE VAN DYK: Paul the Apostle.

MILTON VIORST: Paul the Apostle made his way across Asia Minor to Damascus.

Yes, I think this is part of that same competition. It hasn't always been bloody, but it has been bloody a good part of the time. Now it's bloody again.

JERE VAN DYK: This would be the third or the fourth war, if you will, between Islam and Christianity, if we count the Crusades.

MILTON VIORST: Probably a lot more if we counted all the wars between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian West. I never counted them, but it's not just three or four.

We usually say the Arabs won this huge strategic victory by taking over all of North Africa, going up to the Pyrenees, and then the Christian world counterattacked with the Crusades. Then the Ottomans took over, and there were lots of wars for control in the whole Mediterranean region. Then the Christian world overthrew the Ottomans. There has not been a significant Islamic military power since then.

But, as I have pointed out to people who listen to me, in the place of military power in the conventional sense, the Arabs have shown themselves, as they have since the time of Muhammad, as very good at, if not organized warfare, then disorganized warfare, guerilla warfare, hit-and-run warfare. They always were good at that and are good at it now. That's why so many of our people are being killed.

JERE VAN DYK: Let's start at the beginning, then. How did Muhammad bring his followers together? You talk about this in your book. You spoke about it so eloquently in your speech at the Council just now. How did he bring them together to develop this uniform unanimity, if you will, this cohesiveness, and how has this held on today, this sense of theology, this sense of religion, of cohesiveness?

MILTON VIORST: Muhammad claimed—and I say that without embarking on the dispute about whether he did or he didn't get the word directly from God—Muhammad's belief, which he conveyed to his followers, was that he got revelations directly from God, and he produced, as a result, these long dialogues between him and God. Eventually, they were put together into the Koran, and the Koran has proven to be an extremely persuasive manual for believers—probably more persuasive among believers than the Bible is among Christians and Jews.

JERE VAN DYK: Why? Why is that?

MILTON VIORST: You're asking a very difficult question, "Why is that?"

JERE VAN DYK: Why do you think, based upon your many years of experience in the Middle East?

MILTON VIORST: I can't say. That's not within my framework. My area is basically political Islam. I think your question is a very legitimate one. I postulated on it in a book I wrote called [*In the Shadow of the Prophet*](#), not so much in this book, which is kind of a summary of some of those ideas. In *In the Shadow of the Prophet*, I talk a great deal about the formative era of Islam. I also talk about the era around the 10th century when Islam engaged in a struggle between modernists, if you like, who were under the influence of ideas that came from the empire of the Greeks, and the traditionalists.

The modernists lost and the traditionalists won, and so there has been very little transformation in Islam since its origins. It is not only a religion that has remained theologically faithful to itself, but, I would argue, because of its faithfulness to itself, it has created a society that has missed the great periods of tumult, but also dynamism, that characterized the Christian world over the last 1,000 years.

JERE VAN DYK: And has this theology given Arabs, if you will, a greater strength than has been given to this more secular West now?

MILTON VIORST: This is a very strong civilization. Arabs are very proud of it, and justly so. I remember once I was in Algiers, in a French church—a big French cathedral, as I recall—that had been

taken over after the Algerian success in driving the French out of their country. There was a plaque—I am not quoting it exactly, but it's pretty close—saying, "The French occupied our country from 1830 to 1962, and in that period they succeeded in converting six people to Christianity." That figure may not be accurate, but the idea is accurate. There was very little success—and this is when Christian missionaries were all over Algeria, and they had behind them the force of the French administration. They still were unable to have any success at conversion.

Arabs are very proud of that. They are a very successful evangelical religion in converting others to their faith and relatively few convert from Islam to other faiths.

JERE VAN DYK: In your book you talk about how when Christian missionaries went to the Middle East they brought with them the printing press, and the printing press helped—you describe this in a fascinating way—indirectly, to create nationalism. Can you go over that a little bit with us today?

MILTON VIORST: Europe was at that point a very dynamic civilization. Even before it succeeded in conquering what we now know as the Arab world, it did succeed in infiltrating it with missionaries—not just missionaries, also teachers and others, but largely missionaries. The missionaries, somewhat inadvertently, but by an actual process, brought with them the ideas with which they were raised. It was the Christian missionaries who actually seeded the Middle East with the idea of nationalism, such as we know it in the West.

The big hotbed of nationalism before World War I was the American University of Beirut. At that point, it had a different name. It was something like the Beirut Christian College or something of that sort. But it was a missionary institution. It aroused its students with an idea of, "Hey, there is a grandeur here among us Arabs and we have to regain it." That was very important. That spread.

Of course, the printing press, because it was printing books and conveying Western ideas, was absolutely essential to the success of the spread of these Western ideas.

JERE VAN DYK: How much have Western ideas—this is another fascinating point in your book—permeated or changed the Muslim world, particularly the Arab world? Not so much as we think, I get the impression in reading your book.

MILTON VIORST: It depends upon which Western ideas. Certainly, Western nationalism, I think, has changed it a huge amount. Throughout the period from 1500 right up until the eve of World War I, there was no sense of nationalism—I mean, Arabs were aware that they were Arabs and that they were different from Turks, but they were part of the Ottoman Empire, and they were very content to live as provinces within the Ottoman Empire. There were uprisings among the Christian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Serbia had an uprising and Greece had an uprising. By the end of the 19th century, both of them had achieved their independence. There was nothing like that within the Arab world, because they looked upon themselves as Muslims, as were the Turks.

It wasn't until the seed was planted, I would argue, by the missionaries and began to grow that the whole idea of nationalism took some root. It didn't really spread until after World War I, when the whole Arab world was taken over by the Christian West. It was then that Arab nationalism exploded, and it was an explosion not just of, let's call it Arabism, but it was an explosion of anti-Christianity, anti-foreigner, anti-Westerner.

It is true that the Arabs rejected over the course of time a lot of Western ideas. They have not been very warmly disposed to accepting secularism, accepting humanism. By humanism, I mean putting human well-being on a level of importance greater than God—ideas which have become the standard within Western society. The Arabs have had a lot of trouble with that, largely because these are ideas which are far removed from Islam, and they have trouble with them. They had trouble with them then. They don't have trouble with cars and computers and washing machines, but they do have trouble, in my judgment, with the intellectual and spiritual, if you like, framework that produced these ideas in the West.

I have always remembered that my Egyptian friends will say, "My grandfather used to talk about that," or

“My great-grandfather used to talk about this when I was a kid.” In 1900, Egypt was at about the same level of lifestyle as much of the Far East. They look upon what has happened in Japan and Korea and elsewhere, where great modern civilizations are thriving, and the Arab world has not changed a great deal since the beginning of the 20th century. They are remorseful about this. There is no question about that. But on the other hand, they are not prepared to say that they want to abandon their Islamic values. They are very dedicated to their Islamic values. My judgment is that it’s probably a package deal. You don’t get one without the other. But Arabs have not embraced the idea of a package deal at all.

JERE VAN DYK: We’re talking about nationalism. The Ottoman Empire fell; the caliphate fell. Nationalism resulted from that. Do you think that nationalism can exist, that nation-states can exist, or, because of this strong tie to Islam still, do they secretly or subconsciously want to go back to this universal *Ummah*, or community, if you will?

MILTON VIORST: No. I think there is a vision of an Arab state. Sometimes they use the term “the Arab nation” and that sort of thing. But I don’t think that that is much of a reality. There were centuries during which all of Christianity thought of itself, you remember, as the Holy Roman Empire. We were all part of one great empire—but, meanwhile, France and Germany and everybody else were thriving, even though this was in contradiction to another set of values. I think it’s false to believe that the human mind cannot entertain contradictory ideas at the same time. I think that’s what is happening in the Arab world. They are definitely Iraqis or Egyptians or Syrians; at the same time, they think of themselves as part of the Arab nation. These are contradictory ideas, but they coexist.

JERE VAN DYK: In terms of Islam, [Zarqawi](#) says that “we are at war with democracy,” and we are trying to impose these Western values. Yes, they’ll accept the washing machine or a rifle or an airplane, but not what they could consider Western religion. Some people have said that.

MILTON VIORST: They have said it. Democracy, in my judgment, isn’t the problem per se that they are rejecting—although maybe Zarqawi does, because Zarqawi is a fundamentalist and can only think, I believe, in tribal terms. But there are many Arabs who have gone much further in entertaining alternative institutions. There is nothing in the Koran that most Arabs see—certainly, that I see (but my judgment isn’t the one that’s important)—that stands in the way of democracy.

The problem with democracy is that during the era of imperialism, the British and the French, and now in some measure the United States, use democracy as a trick for controlling them. That’s their hostility to democracy.

We Americans think of ourselves as being so noble in bringing democracy to them. What they see is the same old Western imperialism coming again, with an American flag rather than a British or a French flag, and democracy is just a trick. They had a lot of unhappy years with democracy, and I’m not sure that they see it as the wave of the future.

JERE VAN DYK: In terms of democracy, in your book you talk about how [President Woodrow Wilson](#) went to Europe and talked about self-determination for the Arabs—a very religious man. Now we have President Bush, who, as you made clear in your speech, is an exceedingly religious man. Do you think that he will succeed? Do you think this has become too much of a clash between civilizations, if you will—and you talk about that in your book—for democracy to sprout, to grow?

MILTON VIORST: No, I don’t think democracy will survive in the Arab world until it becomes a kind of indigenous democracy, one that is identified with their values and not with ours. As long as it’s an import, it operates under such a disadvantage, under such a historical burden, that I think the chances of its surviving are not very great.

On the other hand, the Arabs have really not had a chance to develop their own institutions. They have only been free of the Ottomans since World War I, after which the British and the French came over and ruled them. Then they became independent states after World War II. They had a lot of problems. They realized that they needed a period of some tranquility to develop institutions of their own, but what

happened was that we came in and told them they had to take sides in the Cold War. The Cold War then took over in the Middle East.

Of course, there is always the conflict with Israel. That has been a distraction. Sometimes it has been a false distraction, in the sense that it has kept them from having to make the essential decisions among themselves. But they have not lived with the kind of framework in which they make these decisions, the decisions they know they have to make for themselves, want to make for themselves. They have not had the opportunity to do that without a hovering foreign presence—namely, us—and that's where it is now.

JERE VAN DYK: You talked about Israel. In your book you say that some people in the Middle East call Israel a "crusader state." I had never heard that before.

MILTON VIORST: They do call it a crusader state, yes. They look upon it as a Western implant in the Arab world. Of course, needless to say, Israelis don't look upon it that way. As a matter of fact, Israel's independence, as they read their own history, was achieved by overthrowing a crusader state, the British.

I talk a lot in this book about historical memory. Jews have quite different historical memories from Arabs. But that doesn't stop Arabs from saying that Israel is a crusader state, because it's a Western imperial implant in their land.

JERE VAN DYK: When you talk about historical memory being somewhat different from actual memory—

MILTON VIORST: Actual history.

JERE VAN DYK: Actual history, thank you. Do you think that Arabs can, with regard to Israel, find common ground here, or is this intractable, based on all of this bad DNA that now exists?

MILTON VIORST: Certainly, the DNA was bad from the beginning and has grown only worse.

I have never been totally without some hope. I think that most Arabs whom I encounter—and I have to acknowledge that most of the Arabs I have encountered over the course of my four decades of work in the region have tended to be intellectuals who have some knowledge of Western culture and the rest. I have met a lot of Arabs in my life, but I have to confess that those are the people that I met most often. Most of them recognize that the war with Israel has been a distraction, and, in my judgment, they are willing to reach some compromise with the Israelis, not because they are going to love the Israelis or love Jewish independence or love this crusader state, but because they have other priorities.

I think that Israel has made it difficult for them, and, more recently, so has the United States, certainly under President Bush, who is really the first president since World War II who has not made a serious effort to reconcile the difference between them—not that there has been a huge amount of success, but there has been some. He is certainly the first president since World War II who has not directed American policy seriously to narrowing the differences between Israel and the Arabs.

JERE VAN DYK: You talked about how important Islam is to the Muslim world for Arabs. Do you think that President Bush's deep Christian faith is a principal reason for the way in which he acts? Do you think there's a tremendous conflict there between the two?

MILTON VIORST: I have to confess I do. I think President Bush, like everybody else, is a complex man. Jimmy Carter was very Christian, and Ronald Reagan was very Christian. But I think that President Bush has this component of evangelicalism within him that says, "Virtue lies in promoting my form of the faith to outsiders." I think that when President Bush talks about the "crusade," it's not just a slip of the tongue; it's also a frame of mind. I think that he is a president who is following Christian values in promoting this war.

It may not be all values. I think in our time—maybe in all time — great events have multiple causation. Oil is a factor. The Israelis are a factor. President Bush's relationship with his father may very well be a factor.

But I think we would be making a mistake by not recognizing that Christianity, and this kind of dynamic Christianity in which evangelical Christians believe, is not also a major source of American policy in that region.

JERE VAN DYK: You talk in your book about how both faiths, Islam and Christian, are evangelical faiths, if you will. Both have a need to go out and attempt to witness for others and to win people over, to propagate the faith. So there is an inherent conflict there, isn't there?

MILTON VIORST: Oh, absolutely. No question about it. Judaism is also a monotheism, but it is not evangelical. It pretty much makes it difficult for outsiders to become Jews. Christianity and Islam, both not only embrace but actually seek out converts. That's what I call the historical memory that is deeply embedded in the values of people on both sides.

JERE VAN DYK: So today we are in this morass in Iraq, which is probably—or is it? I should ask you — an extension of this continuing conflict, this conflict that we have had in the past.

MILTON VIORST: Yes, with the recognition that there may be multiple causation. But, yes, I think it is the latest chapter in a war that began when Muhammad's armies left Arabia and began conquering what was then the Christian world. Yes, I do.

JERE VAN DYK: And it's the West, once again, trying to impose itself on the East, in the eyes of the Muslim world.

MILTON VIORST: Both have sought to impose their ideas on the other. But at the moment, and for the past two centuries, because we have had experiences in the West that the Arab world has never had—namely, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution—we have learned to build, to organize, to resolve problems in a far different way from them. Whether you like our values or their values—you are entitled to choose whichever one you want—the fact is, it has made us much more powerful at this stage of history, and it's probably going to continue to keep us in a position of military superiority, and military superiority which has behind it also industrial superiority, all of these forces which lie at the foundation of military strength.

JERE VAN DYK: But even in spite of all of that—and your book is entitled *Storm from the East*—you still feel that there is a very strong ability among the Arabs to fight back and that by no means is the United States going to, in the view of certain people, prevail there. In fact, I don't think you feel that at all.

MILTON VIORST: No. One of the things we have learned—or something I think President Bush should have learned before we sent our armies in there—is that it took the British and the French a great many casualties and a huge amount of cost during the high point of their imperial adventure in the Arab world—that is, from World War I to World War II. It cost them a lot of losses in bodies and in resources. The Arabs are not very good in terms of mobilizing huge armies, with tanks and guns and airplanes and all that sort of thing, but they're pretty good at the kind of war that they have been waging since the time of Muhammad—hit-and-run war, guerilla war, hide-and-see war. Call it what you want, they are better at that than we are. They are holding their own.

At the moment, they are doing more than holding their own in Iraq. I don't see our military capacity or anything else that we are prepared to bring to Iraq at this point overcoming that capacity that the Arabs manage to demonstrate, as we find, every morning when we pick up the paper—fifteen dead here, a dozen dead here, two or three Americans killed. It's not like the trench warfare of World War I, but it's very costly in terms of our lives, nonetheless.

JERE VAN DYK: In your book, and also in your speech this morning, you talked about the unintended consequences of the American invasion in Iraq. What are some of those unintended consequences?

MILTON VIORST: One of the ironies of it is that we have strengthened Iran. The president reminds us all the time how evil the Iranians are and how he would like to change that regime. But the fact is that we have totally transformed—it's more than just planting the seeds; we are seeing the trees grow.

The Shiites, for the first time, really are becoming a major political force in the Arab world. They were always a very small minority. Although they were a majority of the population in Iraq, largely because the Turks were Sunnis and they favored the Sunnis in the Iraqi provinces, the Sunnis were historically able to dominate the Shiites.

Well, we come in here and we talk about democracy and we hold a big election. And the fact is that the Shiites are 60 percent of the population of Iraq, and lo and behold, the Shiites become the dominant force in the emerging Iraqi government.

There is a difference between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites. Iraqi Shiites are Arabs, and they think of themselves in Arab terms. Iranians think of themselves in Persian terms. They are different cultures.

The Shiites have this major bond of commitment to Shia Islam. Inevitably, they are going to grow closer, as they have grown closer since the American invasion. This means that Iran will grow stronger. We don't like that, but we did it. This was something we had not intended to do, but it was foreseeable. This didn't come as any great surprise to anyone who has spent a little time studying this region.

Yes, I think that what we have done is inadvertently strengthened a country we have designated as our enemy—not just there; also in Lebanon. There is a significant segment of Shiites in Lebanon. They are stronger now, as a result of what we have done in Iraq.

So we have made our mission—if that is our mission—of establishing kind of a democratic tranquility throughout the region, in effect, that much more difficult for ourselves.

JERE VAN DYK: Based upon your many, many years in the Arab world, can you describe for an audience that may not understand it to the degree, clearly, that you understand it, what is the difference between a Shia and a Sunni Muslim? Beyond the deep theological reasons, are there any other clear differences?

MILTON VIORST: We have frequently heard that mocking expression sometimes attributed to Henry Kissinger about academics—but I don't think even Henry invented it; somebody invented it before him—which is, it's only because the stakes are so trivial that people are so angry and committed about the outcome.

The fact is, there is certainly much more in common between Shia Islam and Sunni Islam than there are differences. But there are enough differences that they continue. Again, if I may, a historical memory is much more important than theology. The Sunnis murdered [Ali](#), and Ali became the head of the Shia movement. This has become embedded deep in the soul of Shiites and Sunnis. They see things in ways that to us are not all that grand. They are really quite small. But if it's deeply lodged in your historical memory and you attach a great deal of importance to it, then you do. If you want, maybe it's like anti-Semitism, if you want to compare it to something that we are more familiar with, which is that Jews are and they aren't what they were 2,000 years ago, and maybe they were or were not responsible for the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so on.

But the fact is that these notions are in the soul of many people, and it is hard to get rid of them. Even when the pope tells us how bad anti-Semitism is and that we have to divest ourselves of it, it stays there, because it's part of our—I use the term “sociological or psychological DNA.” I think that explains it as well as anything.

JERE VAN DYK: When you were referring to Ali, Ali of course being the cousin of Muhammad.

MILTON VIORST: The son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad the Prophet.

JERE VAN DYK: Do you think these deep-seated psychological differences—and I think we touched on this earlier, but I want to come back to it—that exist between East and West, between Islam and Christianity, between Muslims and Christians, are so deep that now, based upon the United States, in the form of the West, invading Iraq, this problem is intractable? If it is not intractable, what do you

recommend?

MILTON VIORST: What I think is that the Muslims of the Middle East—and by that I mean to distinguish them from, let's say, the Muslims of Indonesia or Malaysia (that's a different culture, by some measure, I think an important different culture)—they have to be given an opportunity to solve these problems themselves, which is what they are asking for. What they don't want is George Bush to come in and tell them what's good for them. That's what we have now. We have a president—and, periodically, we have a secretary of state — who comes around and gives little lectures about what's good for them. Maybe it is good for them. I'm not saying that all the advice they get is bad. Some of it might be quite good. But the fact is they would like to do it for themselves.

I think it's important, for example, to note that over the course of my experience as a journalist, as opposed to the side of me that reads books and studies these things—the side of me that is a journalist has spent a lot of time in Iraq. During the course of it, people would come up, in one context or another, and whisper in my ear, "Hey, Saddam Hussein is a terrible, terrible man. He's a tyrant. He's a killer. But he's our tyrant. We understand that we have to deal with him ourselves. It is far more important that we have our tyrant than that we have your good guys."

Of course, they don't think we're such good guys. But the important thing is, "We want to determine our own destiny." That's what imperialism has deprived the Arab world of now for a couple of centuries, and it has gotten much worse for the Arabs since World War I. The fact is that they still don't feel that they have had the opportunity to search out their own solutions to their problems.

One of the things that we all have to acknowledge is that Arabs don't delude themselves. They know that they are behind the rest of the world. They know they are behind not just the United States and Britain and France, but they know they are behind Korea and Japan and Thailand, which is even more embarrassing to them, because those countries didn't have the big head start that we in the West had from the Industrial Revolution. They look at places that once had a standard of living that was approximately their own and now they are living so much better, and they say, "Why can't we do it?"

Their position now is, "We have to do it for ourselves. We can't have the West come in and tell us simply to follow them. That's what we are being told by President Bush today. We have been hearing too much of it from the Western world for a couple of centuries. We will blunder. We will make terrible mistakes. We will fight and die in the course of forging institutions."

Of course, we lost a lot of men, as you will recall—men and women—in our own Civil War. So it wasn't all that easy for us. It wasn't all that easy for Britain and France either to forge the institutions they have today. We tend to forget that. But the fact is that what they want to do is what we did, which is shape up governments that correspond with their personality, not with ours.

JERE VAN DYK: Let them do it. Don't try to impose it.

MILTON VIORST: Let them do it, right.

JERE VAN DYK: You have worked in the Middle East for four decades. Why did you find such an interest in it? Why did you want to go to the Middle East?

MILTON VIORST: I'm not exactly sure. We never know exactly why we follow the course that we wind up following in life. I started out by wanting to learn more about Israel and the Arab-Israeli wars. When I got to Israel, I found that things were considerably different from what we were being fed every day as part of the conventional wisdom. That conflict was a lot more complex. It was very difficult for a journalist at that point to move into the Arab world, and certainly to move back and forth between Israel and the Arab world. But I was fortunate. I was able to do that. Most people seem to think that I was fair in the judgments I made as a writer. I always tried to be fair, even when I was critical of any of the sides.

I remember the first time I crossed over into Egypt. It was terrifying. That was in the 1960s, when there

wasn't much of that. Then, gradually, I became comfortable doing that and could move back and forth in the Arab world with a feeling that I had some understanding of its strengths and limitations.

Why I did that, as opposed to—I started out as a student of French history. I was going to be a professor of French history. That was my intention. The first book I wrote was actually about de Gaulle. But somehow I felt that was a little bit too civilized. It was almost too easy, in a way. It was too much fun going back to France and eating and drinking. I was going to go to the Arab world and learn about that. And I did.

I have no regrets. It was a very exciting way to pursue a career. I hope I was able to bring something back that was worthwhile.

JERE VAN DYK: We've all benefited from it, even today. Are you going to continue the work?

MILTON VIORST: Yes, I think so. I'm getting a little older. One thing about youth is that it's so transitory and passes very quickly. But, yes, I still enjoy going back. I go back as often as the opportunity presents itself, not as often as twenty or thirty years ago, when any pretext would get me back there to learn and to remain. But there's still a lot more for me to learn. I will continue to go back as long as I can.

JERE VAN DYK: And be the professor, as well as the journalist, and teach us like you're teaching us today.

MILTON VIORST: Professor in the sense of writing as wisely as I know how about the subject. But the reason I became a journalist to begin with was that I decided I was not happy with the limitations and the constraints in the academic world. I have been a freelance journalist most of my life. It corresponded with what my psychic needs were. That's about as much as I understand about why I became a "Middle Eastie," as some might say. It has just been pretty exciting for me, and I have no regrets.

JERE VAN DYK: It takes a lot of courage to be a freelance journalist.

MILTON VIORST: I had a few sleepless nights, yes.

JERE VAN DYK: Thank you very, very much, Mr. Viorst, for coming and talking with us.

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