



1993 FULBRIGHT SYMPOSIUM SYDNEY 27-28 OCTOBER

# A Foreign Correspondent's View

**Geraldine Brooks, an Australian journalist working as UN correspondent for the Wall St Journal, was an outstanding contributor to the Fulbright symposium, offering fascinating insights into the difficulties of reporting in the face of cynical governments and an often indifferent world.**

Brooks has covered the Middle East, Asia and the US Mid West. Her coverage of the Gulf War brought her international acclaim.

She drew a harsh picture of US foreign policy, claiming for example that the reason the US acted in Somalia (after the story was broken by another expatriate Australian, Jane Perlez, a year ago) was that George Bush needed a coda to his presidency, and the Pentagon wanted to convince Congress and any incoming administration that its fundings should be maintained.

Brooks said that all the thousands of words and television footage that have poured out of Bosnia have failed to encourage any intervention. Before the US will act, there must be a perception of political gain, she said. While President Bush was not moved by the plight of the Kurds under Saddam Hussein, British Prime Minister John Major took action.

It is impossible for correspondents to generate sympathy for the even worse plight of the Marsh Arabs because they are unable to gain access to Iraq, Brooks claimed.

She said she once thought that political agendas were set by some sort of osmosis trickling down from secret cabals, but she had since realised that newsrooms were too chaotic for this to be a reality. Her own choice of where she goes depends a great deal on the availability of visas and airline flights, and also what her competitors have covered.

There is a strong tendency to cover only disasters. In Bangladesh for ex-

ample, which is only ever mentioned in a context of flood or famine, there was no reporting last year of the fact that two women ran against each other for the prime ministership. In the last year, great progress has been made in Somalia, yet this good news story has been ignored by the media.

## Danger Can Be Seductive

Brooks admitted that the dangerous aspects of being a foreign correspondent were seductive, and that 'survivor's euphoria' - the relief of having survived a close shave with a bullet or a landmine - could become addictive.

She posed a conundrum to symposium participants, asking them to identify two Middle East countries - one a repressive regime run on extremely undemocratic lines, where women were second class citizens; the other a country with women MPs and an elected Parliament, even a satirical magazine. The former is Saudi Arabia, a US ally, the latter Iran, a 'bitter enemy' of the US.

Another speaker, Pierre Salinger, attacked Brooks for what he thought was her unduly favourable picture of Iran. She pointed out that she was not praising Iran, simply pointing out the strange alliances that resulted from strategic decisions. Brooks said the US advisors who formed opinions on Iran had not set foot in the country since the US embassy raid.

She said that the overnight metamorphosis in the media of Somalia's General Aideed from 'warlord' to 'clan leader', which was also identified by Stuart Littlemore, was a direct result of US foreign policy shift.

Brooks posed and answered two questions. Does the media shape images? A bit, was her answer. Does it

shape foreign policy? Only a very little bit, she said.

A questioner asked her what had been the difficulties, as a woman, in covering Islamic countries. Brooks said she had 'fretted' for one year because she could not use her preferred method of working 'from the bottom up', ie talking to people in the streets and markets. Male elites in these countries understand Western women and relate to her satisfactorily, but ordinary men are 'amazed to be accosted by a woman'. She said they tended to have one of two reactions, both undesirable!

Ultimately she found that the way to the men was through women, who would speak freely to her. She got to know the wife and daughters of Khomeini and of members of the Hezbollah, and was able to have contact with the men at times when her male colleagues were being held hostage.

Brooks recently completed a book on images of women in the Middle East, to be published next year.

Geraldine Brooks has won a number of major journalism awards, including the 1993 Distinguished Achievement Award from Columbia School of Journalism and the 1990 Hal Boyle Award for best print reporting for her coverage of the Gulf War. □

