"When things really work," Benazir Bhutto proclaimed 11 days before her death, "it's because politicians, religious leaders and their followers, husbands, wives and children pull together to save each other - and themselves. "It's the way of the world."

According to Ron Suskind, a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal, this path to human salvation reflects the core values of the United States. At its best, as with the Marshall Plan, America does the right thing, cares what others think and asks for nothing in return. If given the chance, Suskind believes, democratic universalism will prevail over terror networks and authoritarian ideologies.

In The Way of the World, Suskind maintains that these principles remain alive with the American people "as a troubled, and troubling decade nears its end."

But, he argues, as he did in The One Percent Doctrine (2006), the Bush administration threw away the moral compass following the attacks on September 11, 2001. Suskind presents new evidence, "the sort of thing generally taken up in impeachment proceedings," that the president and vice president knew Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction before they made war on Iraq. Little wonder, then, that the US is now viewed around the world as a might-makes-right bully, accountable to no one, not even its own people.

In a sometimes kaleidoscopic narrative, Suskind follows several representative characters as they search for saving truths in an increasingly cruel and chaotic world. His protagonists include Usman Khosa, a 20-something Pakistani emigre, detained for questioning by the authorities while on his way to work at a consulting firm in Washington, DC; Mohammed Ibrahim Frotan, a teenage exchange student from Afghanistan, assigned to a home in Denver, Colorado; Candace Gorman, a civil rights attorney, representing Abdul Hamid al-Ghizzawi, a baker in Afghanistan, who has been imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay since 2002; Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, the nuclear proliferation expert at the CIA and Department of Energy; and Bhutto, who, Suskind suggests, had evolved from corrupt prime minister to democrat-in-the-making and begun to wade "into the crowds, buying them oranges and holding babies - letting herself bleed into them, and them into her."

Suskind's faith in the power of person-to-person contact is touching - and a bit naive. Usman's heated exchange with his sister, an Islamic fundamentalist, he writes, ended with an agreement to explore
together the meaning of the phrase "human progress." Similarly, Ibrahim Frotn learned from his friendship with Jillian, a single mother who would have been stoned to death in Afghanistan, that he need not be "an island, fearing monsters."

But, alas, it isn't always that easy. Given similar opportunities, millions of men and women don't - and won't - "search and sweat" until they discover that they're "part of one body, one shared soul." A card-carrying Bush whacker, Suskind blames the American administration for many of the woes of the world. In this book, he adds new details about how the White House sold the Iraq war to skeptical citizens. His brief is compelling, if not quite "a slam dunk."

Early in 2003, he reveals, Tahir Jalil Habbush al-Tikriti, the head of Iraqi intelligence, told British and American officials that his country had no weapons of mass destruction. The White House, Suskind suggests, knew he was telling the truth, but chose to bury the information, instruct the British to close the back-channel to Habbush, and start the "shock and awe" air-strikes on Baghdad.

Suskind may be right. But, as he acknowledges, analysts and policy makers could - and did - dismiss Habbush as a dissembler, doing the bidding of Saddam Hussein. Since Habbush couldn't prove a negative, A.B. Krongard, No. 3 at the CIA at the time, told Suskind, no one at the CIA wanted to go out a limb and endorse his claims as credible.

Suskind's charge that the White House "concocted" a fake letter from Habbush to Saddam, backdated to July 1, 2001, is more difficult to dismiss. In the letter, "Habbush" indicates that Muhammad Atta had received training at the home of Abu-Nidal in al-Dora. He mentions as well that "a small team from the al-Qaida organization" had arranged for a shipment of unspecified material from Niger to Iraq by way of Libya and Syria. When the letter was leaked in December 2003, reporters connected the dots: from Atta in Iraq to 9/11 and from uranium "yellow cake" to weapons of mass destruction.

A 1991 law, Suskind indicates, makes it illegal for any government official to conduct covert action "intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies or media." Rob Richer, former head of the CIA's Near East division and deputy director of clandestine operations, told Suskind that the assignment came on "creamy White House stationery." Others indicated that George Tenet, the director of the CIA, sent it to the Iraq Operations Group. Who actually ordered the operation? Suskind doesn't know.

The Habbush letter, which takes up just a few pages of The Way of the World, has created a sensation in Washington. Tony Fratto, deputy White House press secretary, has dismissed Suskind's allegations as "absurd." Tenet has denied directing anyone to fabricate a letter. Richer now claims that Suskind misunderstood or misquoted him. Meanwhile, although impeachment remains off the table, Democrats are making noises about a congressional inquiry. It's "the way of the world," in the waning days of a Bush administration, about which just about anything can be believed.

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