

*War in the Middle East:
A Reporter's Story*

BY WILBORN HAMPTON

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AGE 10 AND UP • GRADE 5 AND UP

ABOUT THE BOOK

IN SEPTEMBER 1970, WILBORN HAMPTON was working in Rome as a foreign correspondent for U.P.I. (United Press International) when Palestinian guerrillas hijacked three planes and flew two of them to a desert airstrip outside of Amman, Jordan. The day after the hijackings, Hampton was dispatched to Beirut, Lebanon, to help cover the dramatic story. Within days, he was sent to Amman and checked in at the InterContinental Hotel, which was serving as an informal headquarters for the scores of journalists assigned to the hijackings.

Two days later, Hampton was awakened by a cacophony of gunfire, mortar rounds, and the “grinding whir” of armored vehicles moving through the streets below his hotel room. Jordanian army troops were attacking Palestinian guerrillas, and Hampton and his colleagues were trapped inside the InterContinental as chaos overcame the city. A civil war that would become known as Black September had begun.

So begins *War in the Middle East*, the latest book in Wilborn Hampton’s series of accounts told from a reporter’s point of view. As an eyewitness to two of the most important military and political events in the Middle East—Black September and the Yom Kippur War—Hampton not only recounts his experiences and challenges as a journalist during wartime but also succinctly explains the history of events that led up to both wars and clarifies many of the complicated details that make understanding the politics of this war-torn region so difficult to comprehend.

Supplemented with fascinating photographs, *War in the Middle East* offers a compelling firsthand glimpse into a bloody and pivotal period, the events and outcomes of which still affect the Middle East, and the world, to this day.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Before reading:

1. Begin a discussion about current events in the Middle East by asking students to name some of the countries in the region that are currently in the news (such as Iraq, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, or Saudi Arabia). Discuss some of the major political, ethnic, and religious issues that drive the continuing violence in the Middle East. Use this time to clarify and demystify some of the very complicated issues that affect life in that area of the world.
2. In the prologue to *War in the Middle East*, the author writes, “Any understanding of the Middle East must begin with the premise that no one side is right or wrong. There is no black and white, only a thousand shades of gray.” Discuss what the author means by “shades of gray.” Discuss some of the “rights and wrongs” that have happened in the Middle East since biblical times and why it is so difficult to view this region of the world in simplistic terms.

*“We destroy in the day,
and they repair at night.*

*Destroy and repair.
Destroy and repair. It’s
like children’s toys. You
can tear it apart, and in
a few hours it’s back,
fixed again.” (p. 76)*

While reading:

1. The prologue to *War in the Middle East* (pages ix–xv) provides background information on many factors that led up to Black September and the Yom Kippur War: the creation of Israel, the creation and rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (the P.L.O.), the rise of terrorism, and the Six-Day War in 1967. Why does the author compare Israel to David and the rest of the Arab world to Goliath (p. xii)? How did the events leading up to, during, and after the Six-Day War serve as a catalyst to Black September and the Yom Kippur War?
2. Most Palestinians considered Yasir Arafat a freedom fighter, while most Israelis viewed him as a terrorist. How do you explain these two very different attitudes toward the same person? After Israel’s victory in 1967, incidents of terrorism increased around the globe. Why do you think radical terrorist organizations use such violent tactics?
3. The photograph that opens chapter 1 is dramatic. Discuss the incongruity of this image and what it symbolizes.
4. Discuss the origin of the word *guerrilla*. Is there any difference between a guerrilla and a soldier? If so, what are the differences?
5. The photograph on page 9 shows two child soldiers. Describe the differences in body language between these two boys. Do you think it is acceptable for children to fight in wars? What minimum age do you think one should be to serve in the military?
6. In Chapter 4, the author describes some of the realities of the civil war in Jordan and its effects on the civilian population. Discuss what it would be like to be caught in a war. How would it affect daily life? What do you think would be the most frightening aspect of living through such chaos?
7. On page 31, Ali tells the author that he hopes the conflict will go on, because “war is good business.” Discuss what Ali means by this statement. As a Palestinian, Ali views himself as an outcast. Discuss how Palestinians’ feeling of being marginalized, even within the Arab world, has contributed to the violence in the Middle East.

*Like so many things in the
desert, peace still seemed just
like another mirage. (p. 91)*

8. Many things the author describes are simply too terrible for one who has never lived in wartime conditions to fully understand. Discuss the horrors of war described in the book. What surprised you? What didn't? On page 33, the author describes the moral dilemma he found himself in as a group of Bedouin soldiers marched three Palestinian boys at gunpoint into a garage to be executed. Do you think the author made the right decision not to intervene? What do you think you would have done in this situation?
9. What is resentment? What role did resentment play in the Yom Kippur War? On page 57, the author describes the scenery in the Israeli desert as "incongruous." Why is this word such an appropriate descriptor? What other scenes from the book could be described in this way? Reread page 61. Why do you think the nomad disregarded the fighting that was taking place nearby?
10. Why were most Israelis so confident that they would easily and quickly defeat their enemies in the Yom Kippur War? What caused them to doubt their confidence? The picture on page 66 shows an Israeli soldier in a prayer shawl praying in the desert, while in the background more soldiers drive along a narrow strip of road in a military vehicle. How does this image illustrate the role religion plays in most aspects of life in the Middle East and how it contributes to the ongoing conflicts in the region?
11. How are the author and his colleagues like storm chasers? Is being a war reporter something that is appealing to you? Do you think the author was wise to get so close to the front lines?
12. Discuss the following comment made by an Israeli corporal on page 73: "It's crazy. Kids are dying out there, and for what? A stretch of desert? Why don't we just give it back to them? Israel doesn't need it." Do you agree with the corporal? Is there any piece of land in the world that is worth more than human life?

As I stood there waiting to see what happened, three Israeli jets suddenly screamed up from behind me, flying very low, and disappeared over the horizon. I decided I had seen enough action and got back in my car and headed east. (p. 61)

After Reading:

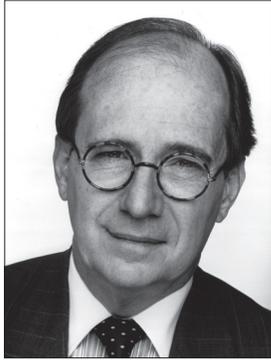
1. If Wilborn Hampton were covering the Iraq War, he might very well be embedded with a ground unit. An embedded journalist travels with one unit and cannot seek out stories elsewhere. Discuss the pros and cons of this type of reporting. Do you think embedded journalists can remain objective?
2. Reread the first paragraph on page 101. After reading the book and learning many of the sentiments of both Israelis and Arabs, did you form an opinion about which side is right? Did you have an opinion before you read the book?
3. On page 103, the author reflects on the ongoing situation of war, hatred, and bloodshed in the Middle East. Do you think that the Arabs and the Israelis will ever be able to live peacefully? If so, how do you think peace will be achieved? If not, why not? Wilborn Hampton wonders what the world will look like one hundred years from now. Discuss your image of the Middle East of the future. Do you think peace will come to the Middle East during your lifetime?

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILBORN HAMPTON

- Q.** *Some of the events and situations that took place in and around the InterContinental Hotel were so tense and chaotic that it seems it would be nearly impossible to write a news story under such circumstances. How were you able to remain composed in order to focus on your work?*
- A.** I'm not sure I was ever very "composed." But I was sent there to do a job, and it's a competitive job. I had to report what was happening, and I had to do it quicker and better than other reporters. You learn to stay focused on the job at hand or you will be on the next plane home.
- Q.** *Throughout the book, you discuss the difficulties you encountered in transmitting your stories, such as power outages and inoperable telex machines. How has the advent of computers and digital-based technologies changed the way news is reported?*
- A.** Modern communications have totally transformed journalism. In the days when I was a correspondent, finding a way to get the story out was half the job. You could have the biggest story in the world, but if you couldn't find a telephone or telex machine, it was just your big secret. Now, with cell phones and cyberspace linkups, a reporter can file a story from the middle of a battle zone.
- Q.** *There are many dramatic photographs in the book, such as the image of the camels passing by the hijacked planes at Dawson's Field outside of Amman, Jordan. How can remarkable photographs such as this one serve as a catalyst to a news story?*
- A.** Although none of my photographs are in the book, I always carried a camera on a big news story in case I saw a great picture opportunity and there wasn't a photographer around. Pictures are very important in conveying the reality of a story to a reader sitting at home in the United States. There is an old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. A reporter can describe the horrors of war in words, but one striking picture can make those words come vividly alive in the minds of readers.
- Q.** *You describe the "agonizing sound" that you heard from the valley below your hotel room. How are you able to remove yourself from the human suffering that invariably goes hand in hand with war?*
- A.** You can never remove yourself from those sounds. But as a reporter covering a major news story, the rush and pressure of the job you are there to do, which is to tell readers back home what is happening, doesn't leave a lot of time to take your emotional temperature or contemplate your inner feelings at the horrors around you. Like someone who witnesses an automobile accident or is caught in a natural disaster like a hurricane or flood, you have to put aside the human suffering in front of you and take action, such as call the police or an ambulance or do what you can to help. In the case of the war correspondent, it's to report the story to the world.
- Q.** *You acknowledge in the book that you are a shy person and that your shyness made it difficult to interview strangers. How were you able to overcome your shyness in these situations? What qualities must a reporter have in order to be successful in wartime situations?*
- A.** The main thing a reporter must have on any story, but especially in covering a war or a disaster, is a discerning eye for detail. It is the details that bring the drama home to readers thousands of miles away, little things that enable readers to identify with the victims. An account of how a mother tried to protect her child during a battle tells readers more about wartime than any pronouncement from a general or politician. Of course, you still have to report what the generals and politicians say, and a shared sense of outrage with ordinary people at what wars inflict on their daily lives helps overcome any shyness one has.

With the silence of the guns, however, an even more agonizing sound reached the hotel from the valley below—the screams and cries of wounded men and women, calling for help. (p. 28)

- Q.** *On page 63, you write that “no reporter likes to have a genuine scoop stolen by censorship.” Does censorship still play a role in wartime reporting?*
- A.** It is different in different countries. And even in places where there is no direct censorship in the sense of having to submit stories for approval before transmitting them, military authorities can impose an indirect form of censorship by refusing to allow reporters in certain areas. Although there is no direct censorship covering the American military in Iraq, for example, it is now almost impossible for American reporters to go out into the field to cover what is happening firsthand. With the advances in modern communications, however, it is becoming harder for governments to impose any kind of censorship, since reporters don't have to rely on government-controlled telecommunication systems to get their stories out.
- Q.** *On page 58, you describe the Israeli building of the pontoon bridge and how you knew you had your story for the day. On page 75, you use the phrase “smelling a story.” What factors are present for you to “know” or “smell” a story? How much is process and how much is instinct?*
- A.** Well, it is a little bit of both. As I mentioned earlier, you have to report the news conferences and statements by military and government leaders. And you have to do your homework and be familiar enough with the issues involved to know when some small change in a government's policy is significant. But you also have to develop an instinct for what readers back home will want to read about. For example, a story about how the war, apart from the death and destruction, was keeping Israeli farmers from getting their crops in and so was generating resentment among Russian immigrants would have been a good story, and I wish I had done it.
- Q.** *How has war changed since you were a correspondent?*
- A.** For one thing, war has become a lot more perilous, not only for journalists but also for ordinary people who would just like to get on with their lives. There was a time when wars were fought on battlefields outside of towns and cities. Families used to pack picnic lunches and go watch the battle. It was rare that innocent civilians became casualties. In World War II, cities themselves became battlefields, and fighting often took place house to house. In modern guerrilla warfare, military commanders no longer worry about who gets killed or wounded, and innocent civilians suffer more casualties than soldiers. With the advent of terrorism as a weapon in itself, innocent civilians and reporters have become the targets. If it's now easier to get a story out, it's infinitely harder to get the story in the first place.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

WILBORN HAMPTON didn't plan to become a journalist. Born and raised in Dallas, Texas, he graduated with a B.A. in English literature from the University of Texas. But a horrible event in American history changed the course of his career and his life: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. As a cub reporter at U.P.I.'s Dallas office, Wilborn Hampton was sent out after the shooting to discover if the president was alive or dead. Covering the assassination made him decide to become a journalist, and those historic events as he covered them would become the subject of the first volume in his Reporter's Story series for young readers.

"There was something exhilarating about being right in the eye of such a tornado of history. It was both horrible and exciting," the author says. "I did go on to become a foreign correspondent, and I covered three different wars in the Middle East and a lot of other page-one banner headline stories. But nothing ever came close to what I felt that day in Dallas, just two months out of college, on my first job."

After leaving Dallas, Wilborn Hampton worked at U.P.I. news desks in New York, London, and Rome before being sent to Beirut to cover the civil war in Jordan known as Black September. Throughout his career, he has covered many major news stories, including the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster. He wrote a book about that and another about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, both with Candlewick Press. Now retired from his position as an editor at *The New York Times*, Wilborn Hampton has drawn on his rare "I was there" insight to take young readers to the heart of some of the twentieth century's most world-changing events.

Wilborn Hampton and his wife, a book editor, live in New York City.

Discussion guide written by Colleen Carroll, a curriculum writer and the author of the twelve-volume children's book series *How Artists See* (Abbeville Kids)