

## **The Neo-Con Gentleman Adventurer**

**Review by Tom Jenney**

**Sam Patten, *Dangerous Company: The Misadventures of a “Foreign Agent”***

**<https://www.dangerouscompanybook.com>**

**Sam Patten made headlines briefly when he got caught up in the Russiagate dragnet and nearly went to prison on a paperwork violation. Although he is now fading into obscurity, his career is an illuminating study of the life of a political operative at the edge of the American Empire.**

**Patten’s recently published memoir, *Dangerous Company*, is very entertaining. He was my housemate in college at Georgetown, and I have talked with him only sporadically over the past three decades. I found it fascinating to learn that he was a minor player (and occasionally, a not-so-minor player) in many historical developments over the past quarter century. The book makes me want to go back and review some of the international news stories of the period (stories I often just skimmed at the time), knowing that Patten was writing news releases, tweaking speeches, and choreographing political theater for players such as Boris Nemtsov**

**(Russia), Mikheil Saakashvili (Georgia), Viktor Yushchenko (Ukraine), and Goodluck Jonathan (Nigeria).**

**For readers who have no idea what those names mean, don't know Patten, and can't find Fallujah or Tbilisi or Abuja on a map, *Dangerous Company* is still worthwhile. The book is an intimate survey of the "soft" side of America's far-flung global empire, as seen through the eyes of a longtime operative.**

**Patten would not agree with my pejorative use of the word "empire." He has always been a neo-conservative. (He might prefer the term "liberal internationalist" – in the sense of "liberal" used abroad, meaning pro-democracy and pro-market.) I helped run the campus libertarian club at Georgetown, and often evangelized to my housemates. One day, I was quoting Jefferson about "Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations... entangling alliances with none." Sam pushed back with a neo-con slogan: "Trade follows the flag."**

**That slogan has a long history, and Patten was well-read enough as a youth to know that history. For admirers of the Roman, British, and American empires, the thesis is that free trade flourishes best (or, in the stronger version, *only*) under the auspices of a strong**

**international military presence. According to that thesis, the flag – whether carried by legions, frigates, or remote-controlled missiles – must go ahead of commerce to keep the peace and secure the political and legal conditions for extended trading networks. A modern corollary is that the benevolent international hegemon must also use economic carrots and sticks to restrain the protectionist impulses of national leaders who use patriotism as an excuse for maintaining or setting up tariff and subsidy rackets to prop up crony interest groups.**

**The garden-variety libertarian, by contrast, tends to argue that free trade flourishes any time governments get out of the way and let it happen. Kids will set up lemonade stands in their driveways if county health inspectors don't bog them down in bureaucracy. My own take is to see the success of empire-led free trade as a matter of probability. Most of the time, empires will get over-extended trying to maintain hegemony in a naturally multi-polar world and will end up wasting the blood and treasure of their homelands. But, every once in a while, an empire will succeed in pulling off a prosperous century of Pax Romana, Britannica, or Americana.**

**At the edge of an empire, a character naturally emerges: the Gentleman Adventurer. Exhibit A is Sir James Brooke, who ruled**

**as the “White Rajah” of Sarawak in Borneo from 1841-1868. Flying the Union Jack, Brooke suppressed piracy in the waters around Indonesia, led native armies against slavers and cannibal hordes, and promoted in his realm what he saw as the civilizing influences of Christianity and commerce. As colonial governors went, Brooke was a relatively good one.**

**Patten was born to be a modern Gentleman Adventurer. First, there’s the British connection. His grandfather was English and his godfather was a Member of Parliament, where Patten interned as a young man. Much of the rest of his family comes from New England WASP stock. Aside from the brief episodes of unpleasantness circa 1776 and 1812, upper-set New England WASPs are famous for being Anglophiles and for harboring a nostalgia for the British Empire.**

**Patten’s extended family tree is peppered with State Department types. His step grandfather was the journalist and Cold War hawk Joseph Alsop. His grandmother was Susan Mary Alsop, a prominent Washington socialite who hosted some of the most important cocktail parties in a town and an age in which such parties were crucial venues for the interaction of a bipartisan collection of politicians, journalists, and foreign-policy strategists.**

**Patten also came of age politically at a time when Ronald Reagan, by facing down the Soviets, helped to bring about the collapse of that evil empire and usher in what many thought would be an age of benevolent American global hegemony.**

**So, what does a young Georgetown grad with a taste for adventure do? He goes abroad. After a public affairs gig with a privatized oil company in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Patten worked for a taxpayer-funded think tank called the International Republican Institute, which was chaired by John McCain for a quarter century. (Its sister org is the National Democratic Institute.)**

**I am skeptical about the value of our tax dollars at work in such operations, but it's possible that in a few places, IRI and NDI may have helped some countries become marginally more democratic. (Even before I became a libertarian, I was cynical about America's international adventures. I had originally gone to Georgetown with a vague vision of joining the foreign service – but not to make the world a better place. My vision involved getting drunk in hotel bars in dusty foreign cities and meeting exotic women.)**

**For those who are curious about what American political operatives do in faraway lands, Patten's trajectory is instructive. Having**

begun as a young idealist working to promote democracy and trade, he ended up as a hired-gun consultant for politicians in the emerging democracies (I'm tempted to put that noun in scare quotes) of Central Asia and Eastern Europe. In a few instances, Patten switched sides, working for politicians he had previously attacked. "Whether I'm a political mercenary or a highly bespoke whore," he writes, "is really a matter of opinion. Look at my dance card and judge for yourself."

Patten's dance card suggests that even as a hired gun, he tried to nurture his "soft spot for underdogs or political heroes in waiting." As Judge Amy Jackson said during Patten's sentencing in the Russiagate charade, he didn't "simply sell [himself] to the highest bidder."

Patten is proudest of a successful effort to help prizefighter Vitaly Klitschko win reelection as mayor of Kyiv. Early in the book, Patten declares that "Honest men tend to do poorly in politics." (The book is littered with sage and usually cynical aphorisms from the political consulting industry.) But, his greatest satisfaction in the Klitschko victory is that his candidate appears to have been a genuinely decent person: "I don't think I ever heard him lie, which is very strange for a politician."

*Dangerous Company* is very Graham Greene. As a Quiet American, Patten survived two close calls involving bombs in Iraq and dodged several potential kidnappings in places around the globe.

(Ironically, in terms of actual blood loss, his two worst incidents happened on the streets of Washington, DC, where he survived two stabbings.) In several places in the book, we find Our Man in Baghdad/Tbilisi/Kyiv staring into glasses of whiskey, pondering what it all means, and wondering how he's going to repair his marriages when he finally gets a chance to go home.

The overall theme of Patten's career is disappointment. He is candid about his low batting average and the moral status of his clients. Some of his clients were the least-bad politicians available in a particular election. In some cases, he argues that the victories of some of his clients – had there been victories – might've led to better political balances and thereby prevented worse things from happening.

During the Iraqi election of 2014, Patten was working to get the Sunnis a meaningful seat at the national table in a proportional representation scheme that had consigned their parties to permanent minority status. (I tend to agree with Jon Basil Utley's

**take on PR: it's a decent scheme in secular countries where parties squabble over relatively low-stakes issues, but it's a recipe for resentment and violent strife in regions with deep sectarian divisions.) The failure of the 2014 effort – which was probably doomed from the outset – helped to open the door wider to the truly horrific ISIS mess that followed. Patten concludes that chapter by wondering if he had been “an accessory to yet another disaster.”**

**Foreign-policy types are nothing if not compulsive meddlers. At Georgetown, I remember talking to many young Kissingers, some still sporting pimples, who offered multi-point plans for how to fix various countries. The plans usually involved being ready to send in American troops or park US warships off the coasts of those countries.**

**Fresh from a disastrous defeat in Iraq, Patten went back to meddling. Early in the Trump administration, he plotted with Steve Bannon, Iraqi tycoon Faisal al Keadairy, and Blackwater founder Erik Prince on a scheme to split Iraq into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'a ministates. As Patten points out, it was an idea that Joe Biden had endorsed at one point, before he joined the Obama administration (which was focused on trying to placate the mullahs in Iran).**



**I'm a knee-jerk political decentralist, so if you held my family at gunpoint and forced me to push a possible partial fix on Iraq, I would probably choose the ministate option. Still, internationalists have an unhealthy dedication to the Pottery Barn Rule of foreign policy ("You break it, you bought it"). Guys like Patten, who have spent years on the ground with the innocent victims of nasty civil wars, have genuine remorse over the broken pottery. They really want to try to glue it all back together. Given how many countries America has broken over the past two centuries, following the Pottery Barn Rule would entail endless fix-it interventions around the globe. In any case, the ministate plan ultimately went nowhere.**

**My great fear as I read the book was that the Gentleman Adventurer would offer a policy recommendation at the end. Something to the effect of, "Despite how dirty and futile it all seems, we must soldier on with stiff upper lips to continue taking up the WASP Man's burden." I'm grateful to report that Patten offers no such recommendations.**

**In a vignette about a trip he took in March 2022 to bring short-wave radios to Ukrainian soldiers, Patten complains that America "until now has done little of practical use to deter Putin's aggression." But he doesn't offer any grand plans to fix the situation. The book's**

**ending gives the strong impression that Patten has retired from his foreign adventures to live a very local life in Maine.**

**In a great irony, the factor that finally wrecked Patten's career as an international operative was the highly polarized domestic American politics in the Age of Trump – a politics in which he had been relatively uninvolved. Among other things, the self-described “New England RINO” did not vote for Trump in 2016. His main crime was being an associate of Paul Manafort. As one of Patten's consultant colleagues told him, “If they're coming after you, then they really don't have anything.” Having failed in their mission to find any significant collusion between Trump and Russia, Robert Mueller and the Department of Justice needed to save face by taking some scalps – any scalps they could find.**

**In telling his story, Patten offers some advice that will be familiar to libertarians and constitutional conservatives: “Never, ever talk to the FBI without a lawyer.” And, when a hyper-partisan and leaky Senate committee asks you to submit a thousand pages of emails for a “voluntary” interrogation, you should probably decline.**

**The bad behavior of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence during Russiagate also comes in for a well-deserved beating in the**

book. Around the time of his sentencing, Patten had coffee with one of our Georgetown housemates, Noah Shachtman, who is now editor-in-chief at *Rolling Stone*. Shachtman is no fan of Trump – to put it very mildly – but at one point he asked Patten, “Did it ever occur to you that you were set up?” (Noah is one of the funniest people I’ve ever met. He once interrupted one of my sermons about Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” by yelling, “Tom, you get jerked off by the invisible hand!”)

*Dangerous Company* is well-paced, especially for a book that by its nature must include a lot of names, locations, and policy details. Patten is especially good at relating the kinds of random incidents that tend to befall a Gentleman Adventurer in far-flung locales. Here is one of my favorite paragraphs: “The next fight is with a customs official when he says I can’t take Kazakh cash out of the country. After telling him he is almost as much of a crook as his president, the next thing I know, I’m waking up on the tarmac in Moscow’s Domodedovo Airport with an empty wallet, a fat lip, and a hell of a hangover.”

Patten is a good writer. He should be: he has written copy for much of his career. That said, there are a few hiccups. The changes between present and past tense are a little jarring at the beginning

**of the book – though they soon smooth out. And, there is usually at least one sentence in every chapter that feels too pulpy or reaches too far in an effort to be clever.**

**To the charge that Patten drops too many names in the book, I would counter that it's necessary. The name-dropping shows that America's foreign-policy adventurers operate in some really small circles. The upper-level players really do all know each other.**

**Female readers will probably recoil at Patten's descriptions of women. The tags are not as macho as those in Flashman or Bond novels, but they're noticeable: "a comely blonde," "strikingly attractive," "breathtakingly beautiful," "implausibly good-looking." Et cetera. I suspect that is deliberate. Culturally, Patten is a product of the empires of the 19th century and the mid-20th century, and he wants to write the way his heroes wrote.**

**The two sex scenes in the book are really cringey. (My view is that writers should avoid describing sex unless they're doing something deliberately edgy and literary.) But, the very awkwardness of the first sex scene – in a bathroom at The Monocle on Capitol Hill – helps to set up a punchline incident that is one of the funniest things**

**I've read in a long time. I will never again hear the name "Elaine Chao" without chuckling.**

**I also suspect that the cringey parts were deliberate. By being overly honest about romance, Patten is saying to the reader, "See? I'm not holding back anything. I'm baring my soul to you." And, there's a lot of soul-baring in this book.**

**For me, *Dangerous Company* demonstrates that the soul in question was trying very hard to do good and make the world a better place. In general, I'm very skeptical that the means he employed were effective to those ends. But, as H.L. Mencken said about the (anti-imperialist) President Grover Cleveland, I'm willing to say that Patten – the Neo-Con Gentleman Adventurer – was "a good man in a bad trade."**

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