

Mr. Zakaria Builds His Own Utopia

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

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Last year, Fareed Zakaria, the *Newsweek International* editor and television pundit, was invited to participate in a rather unconventional project.

The Dominican Republic had suffered an economic collapse, and the I.M.F. forced the country's central bank to sell a 2,000-acre tract of lush beachfront property that it owned. A group of about 20 American luminaries formed a consortium to purchase the land, with the idea of building a sort of utopian community, where artists and writers would be invited to stay at cost and the moguls and moneymen who'd financed the place could vacation, play golf and bask in the glow of their artsy neighbors. The list of "founding residents" includes Moby, Charlie Rose, Alex von Furstenberg, the hedge-fund manager Michael Novogratz, fashion designer Lela Rose and, to lend the group a little political weight, Mr. Zakaria.



"In New York, you have a lot of connectors—people who are mostly just social," said Boykin Curry, the New York investment manager who spearheaded the Dominican enterprise. "And then you have a lot of smart intellectuals. The two don't overlap very often, but [Fareed] has both. It's not just his ideas and not just his connections, but it's the interplay of the two that allow him to be so interesting."

Mr. Zakaria, 41, in the midst of a whirlwind day that involved a round-trip flight from LaGuardia Airport to Washington, D.C. for a taping of his television show, downplayed the Dominican investment as "an interesting example of globalization" that he was only "peripherally involved" in. But the whole affair says a great deal about the Indian-born media figure and his skill at navigating the worlds of foreign policy, celebrity and the Upper East Side elite.

In addition to his commitments at *Newsweek International*, where Mr. Zakaria doesn't do much actual editing but comes up with ideas and suggestions for the direction of the magazine, there are numerous other endeavors: his *Newsweek* column; his PBS program, *Foreign Exchange with Fareed Zakaria*; his frequent appearances on ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*; and a possible new book to follow up *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, the best-seller he published in 2003.

He is one of a breed of writer-intellectuals whose name was known only in limited circles prior to Sept. 11, 2001. Thereafter, his ability to interpret the Muslim world and his status as a pro-Iraq war, neocon liberal transformed him into a media star. He packaged the world's problems into neat *Newsweek* cover stories such as "Why They Hate Us" (about Islamic rage toward the West) and "Why America Scares the World" (about American power and arrogance), typically offering the comforting subhead: "... and what we can do about it." He became a regular on *The Daily Show*. His friends like to predict that someday he'll become Secretary of State; his critics accuse him of being a Bush- administration-friendly apple-polisher.

While Mr. Zakaria is very focused on broadening his media platform—expanding his "reach," as he likes to call it—he is also busy navigating the social one, the dinners, speeches and charity events through which he cultivates powerful mentors and allies. His patrons include former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who invites him over for eclectic dinner parties, and Pete Peterson, the chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations, whose journal *Foreign Affairs* provided Mr. Zakaria with his first publishing job.

"I look up to people who really make you think seriously about the big issues that are going on, that confront the world, either historically or today," said Mr. Zakaria. "What I like are 'idea' books and 'idea' people."

His affinity for such people revealed itself early on. As an undergraduate at Yale, where he took hold of the college's political union, he brought in outside speakers such as William Buckley, George McGovern, Bob Shrum

and Caspar Weinberger for debates and discussions with students. They would often leave as future Friends of Fareed.

"[Fareed] says, what's so great about America is that powerful old men, they like to adopt you and teach you what they know and then help you," said Mr. Curry, who attended Yale with Mr. Zakaria. "He acts as if that's happening to everybody. I think there's something almost boyish about him. He's incredibly competent, but you also want to help him out. So he's got all these boosters. And each of them probably thinks they were key to making him what he is. He attracts mentors like no one I've ever met."

LAST THURSDAY MORNING, DEC. 15, Mr. Zakaria was on the Delta Shuttle headed for Washington, dressed in a dark jacket and pants, with a white dress shirt that was slightly unbuttoned and square-toed loafers, his hair glistening with a touch of pomade. His cheeks were a tad gaunt, his eyes set deeply into his face. In his lap he clutched a manuscript for Madeleine Albright's upcoming book about religion and foreign policy, sent to him by her publisher. On the back of it he was scribbling notes—"Orhan Pamuk," "illegal immigration."

"I'm not a reporter—I never have been. I don't come out of that tradition at all, and I have a lot of respect for it," Mr. Zakaria said. "I do a kind of analytic journalism—you know, public-intellectual kind of work—and what I like about the journalism part of it is, I'm trying to raise issues. I'm trying to do stuff with a *purpose*."

Mr. Zakaria and his wife, Paula Throckmorton, whom he married in 1997 after mutual friends introduced them ("Not an arranged marriage," he said, "but an arranged date"), are known for their expertise in gourmet food and fine wine. They have two children, Omar, age 6 and Lila, age 2, and live in a four-story townhouse off Riverside Drive. (Mr. Zakaria is grappling with the question of whether or not to teach his son Hindi at the moment.) Fareed himself was born and raised in Mumbai, India, in a Muslim household that also celebrated Hindu holidays. His father, Rafiq, was a prominent scholar and political figure whose lifelong obsession was promoting harmony between India's Muslims and Hindus. His mother, Fatima, is a former editor at *The Times of India*.

While Mr. Zakaria said that his parents didn't exhibit the classic Indian desire to control every aspect of their children's destinies, they clearly instilled an intense work ethic. (His older brother, Arshad, has an M.B.A. from Harvard, was head of global markets and investment banking at Merrill Lynch, and now runs a hedge fund called New Vernon Capital.) In school, Mr. Zakaria said that he was initially streamed into the sciences, which is what the smart kids studied in India—until he got to Yale and asked himself, "What am I doing?" He switched to political science, and went on to get a Ph.D. from Harvard.

During the summers, he worked at various journalism internships. He said that he learned how to edit from Michael Kinsley, then the editor of *The New Republic*, who marked up the first article that Mr. Zakaria wrote for the magazine while he was an intern. The piece was about a "witch hunt" underway against Samuel Huntington, the Harvard professor of government and international relations. Mr. Huntington would later become a mentor to Mr. Zakaria and the chairman of Mr. Zakaria's dissertation committee.

After he completed his Ph.D., Mr. Zakaria said that his friend, the former *Time* editor Walter Isaacson, convinced him to apply for a job as an editor at *Foreign Affairs*. He stayed at the journal for seven years. The editor of *Newsweek*, Mark Whitaker, recruited him to that magazine in 2000.

"Journalism today has a certain impact and power, a kind of public-education function, that I find enormously attractive," Mr. Zakaria said. "I didn't want to be so removed from the world and be so cloistered I'd rather think about the big issues that matter."

"Optimistic" is one word that could be used to characterize Mr. Zakaria's positions on many subjects. For example, he said that concerns about a crisis in the news media are unfounded. "I think that in the world as I view it, journalism by and large is better today than it's ever been," Mr. Zakaria said. "Let's be honest: *The New York Times* made plenty of mistakes 30 years ago. What's different now is that people constantly catch them at it and correct them on it. I think the nostalgia for the good old days is completely overblown."

Similarly, Mr. Zakaria doesn't fault the press for its erroneous reporting during the buildup to the invasion of Iraq. "We were wrong, the media was wrong, but I guess I don't see it as a symptom of a kind of bad journalism, or journalism that was insufficiently skeptical or questioning of the administration," Mr. Zakaria said. "Maybe there wasn't enough debate about the war—that I might concede. But that's a different issue."

Mr. Zakaria was strongly supportive of regime change in Iraq, although he has published many pieces criticizing the way that the invasion and subsequent occupation have been carried out. He has a few regrets about his

prewar intellectual output. "I mean, I wish I had written more about how dramatic a step this was, that we had to try hard to make it an internationally legitimate event and to bring the world in," he said. "I mean, I said some of these things, but I feel as though, given what happened—how little they did and the price we paid for that—that I should have stressed that much more."

In many ways, Mr. Zakaria's immigrant success story shapes his worldview. A few minutes later, in the town car on the way from Reagan National Airport to the studio, he said: "I basically am a big fan of this country and its potential."

THAT DAY, MR. ZAKARIA WAS TAPING TWO BACK-TO-BACK episodes of *Foreign Exchange*, something he does to minimize his trips to D.C. The concept of the show is to have Mr. Zakaria interview only foreigners in order to introduce Americans to the outside world (although the Americans that Mr. Zakaria likes also seem to creep in). The result is that there are a lot of people with unfamiliar accents on the screen. The first segment was a roundtable discussion with three foreign journalists—Katty Kay, the BBC News correspondent; Hisham Melham, a Washington correspondent for the Lebanese newspaper *Annahar*; and Nayan Chanda, the editor of YaleGlobal Online. After that, there would be a work-off: a full-episode one-on-one interview with friend and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman.

Upon his arrival at the studio, Mr. Zakaria was installed in a makeup chair wearing a black-and-white-striped smock, and a makeup artist began painting his face.

"Are you ready for me to begin working under your eyes?" she asked. Mr. Zakaria said yes, and she hunched over him, coating the purple welts under his eyes with concealer. Mr. Zakaria asked the makeup woman about her recent trip to Asia.

"Everyone is learning English all over the world," Mr. Zakaria said. "There are now 300 million people in China learning English. That's more than the entire population of the United States "

"Uh-huh," she said.

Mr. Zakaria scribbled notes while the makeup artist dabbed petroleum jelly on his lips with a Q-tip.

"I'm going to ad-lib on Friedman's intro," Mr. Zakaria said to his production manager. When asked if he became nervous before his interviews, Mr. Zakaria said, "No. Television is actually very easy."

WHILE THE FIRST INTERVIEW WAS UNDERWAY, Mr. Friedman arrived in the green room. He was wearing a striped suit and a mock turtleneck and could be glimpsed scooping slices of cantaloupe and pineapple off a tray.

"I think he's without question one of the most intelligent people commenting about foreign affairs today," said Mr. Friedman of Mr. Zakaria. "He, like me, is part of this very small—and getting smaller—fraternity of liberal hawks who supported the war, and uh ... like me, hasn't jumped ship yet. Ha, ha. I have a lot of respect for him."

After the taping, Mr. Zakaria, his production manager and six producers sat around the green room, holding an editorial meeting. The session seemed to involve Mr. Zakaria free-associating on topics that interest him while his team took notes.

"I would love to bring Orhan Pamuk on the show ... ," Mr. Zakaria began, a potato chip in hand. "There's a great story in *The Journal* about foreign stocks We should do a show on Israel Hank Paulson and Wendy Paulson, maybe we could get them on Let's get Castaneda, the foreign minister of Mexico What about Iran's wacky president? Or Dubai?"

"Let's call the C.E.O. of InfoSys—he's a friend of mine," Mr. Zakaria added, waving a forkful of salad.

IT WAS THE THIRD TIME HE'D FLOWN TO D.C. THAT WEEK, and Mr. Zakaria looked a bit exhausted as he fiddled with his BlackBerry, waiting to board the plane back to New York. Then some ladies recognized him in the security line. "We watch your show every week!" said one woman. "We don't go out on Friday nights." Mr. Zakaria was very gracious; he almost missed the flight because he agreed to have his picture taken with someone who couldn't get their camera to work.

"I'm acutely aware that it's a limited world, the Upper West Side and things like that," Mr. Zakaria said of his sphere of recognition. "But, you know, I like it. It never bothers me. It's a little disappointing when somebody says, 'Oh, I see you on TV a lot!' I'm not a celebrity. So what I like is if somebody says, 'I've read your book' or 'I've read

an article—you know, I really like what you say about this.”

Slightly less plausible is Mr. Zakaria's insistence that he isn't ambitious or goal-oriented. He also claims that he wouldn't go out of his way to pursue a political career, but if someone asked him, he'd be tempted. "Most of the time, you have to spend a lot of time carrying water for people politically," he said. "Being a courtier to people in power. And I have just chosen not to do that with my life.

"I've never had five-year plans or 10-year plans," Mr. Zakaria continued. "I don't at all mean to be immodest, but I feel like I've achieved some level of success, and now I'm sort of asking myself, 'So what do I do with this now? What messages do I want to get across?' I don't want to just write for the sake of writing or write to become famous "

When asked why he does so much if it isn't due to some sort of motivation, Mr. Zakaria said, "No, it is a drive. But I guess what I mean is ... I probably have a restless side to me where I move forward, but I don't have a *goal*. I'm not trying to get to a *place*.

"The thing I miss most is the ability to read books," he said.

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