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Kit Kat Essay
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The Road Not Taken

Recently a new version of The Count of Monte Cristo hit the movie screens. It is a tale familiar to many of us, but indulge me a few moments to make sure we are all on the same page. Alexandre Dumas has written a story about revenge. A revenge that is contemplated for 13 years and exacted over another ten. Yes, almost an entire career devoted to revenge.

Our "hero", if I may call him that, is unjustly imprisoned for treason. He is innocent. His secret accuser is his best friend, with other accomplices who see benefit from his disappearance. Sent to the Chateau d'If, one of the most vile of the French prisons, he befriends a priest, who teaches him reading, writing, and all the social and military arts needed by the aristocracy. His friend's death in prison conveys to him a treasure map and a means of escape, which he takes full advantage of in order to exact his revenge.

By the way, the novel is based on a true story. There was a man named Picaud, who was secretly imprisoned for treason by some jealous friends, also during the Napoleonic wars. And he did befriend a priest in prison, who also conveyed the secret to a treasure to him. But his imprisonment lasted 8 years and his revenge 10. He was a tailor, and it was 1807, not too far from 1815, the year the novel begins.

Well into his plan for revenge, the movie contains an interesting exchange between our hero and his aide. Seeing the dark side of obsession, the aide says to Edmond Dantes, I will paraphrase, "You have everything one could want: you have wealth, you have a woman who loves you, yet you are willing to throw it away for this revenge. Let it go. Look at what you have. Let go of your hate." Great quote. Too bad it wasn't in the book.

Yet that quote caught my attention. I wanted to hear something like that. Seeing hatred dominate a life that could offer so much more was not comfortable for me. I don't think it is comfortable for many Americans, which is why I suspect the screenwriters put it in.

But in fact, the 19th century world was delighted with this book of divine revenge. Oh yes, Edmond Dantes had brief episodes of doubt. At the death of Madame Villefort and her son, Dumas writes, "Realizing that he had passed beyond the bounds of vengeance, he felt he could no longer say: 'God is for me and with me,' With an expression of indescribable anguish, he threw himself on the [dead] child's body....He rushed into the street, doubting for the first time whether he had the right to do what he had done."

But Dumas, and Dantes, get over that doubt. Within 8 pages, Dantes reassures himself, saying, "...behind me there was concealed an invisible and offended God, Whose agent I was and who did not choose to withhold the blow I had aimed."

And, no, contrary to the movie script, the novel's hero never reunites with his former love Mercedes. In fact, he never forgave her, despite a strong inner urge to do so. After providing for her financially after precipitating the death and financial ruin of her husband, Dumas directs our avenger thus: "The Count went with a heavy heart from the house where he had taken leave of Mercedes, in all probability never to see her again."

The power of a past wrong to continue to rob one of future happiness under the guise of divinely-ordained revenge. Interesting how the movie totally erased this theme, perhaps because the Western writers were at a loss of how to explain or understand it. Indeed, are we Americans unable to understand a life inspired by revenge? Does the world follow the example of Edmond Dantes? Is much of the world unable to let go of past affronts? Will the road to reconciliation -- the road that leaves the past behind and moves on -- be always the road not taken?

Or even worse, must vengeance, or might I say, should vengeance, be seen as heroic? As one critic said of the book, "At the end justice is achieved and virtue is rewarded because good is ultimately stronger than evil...." Such an optimistic conviction, overriding even the personal emptiness Monte Cristo cum hero endured as a result of carrying out his holy war against evil. And a scenario even the Hollywood screenwriters couldn't (or wouldn't?) glorify.

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2001 brought full into the faces of Americans another example of an obsessive hatred that seems to make heroes from lives that could otherwise offer so much more. I am speaking about the attacks of September 11. A horrible, horrible act that embodies evil in the most profound way. An act that has made the name Osama bin Laden familiar to all.

On December 27, the news networks played the now famous tape purportedly showing Osama bin Laden bragging about his great accomplishment on 9-11. Polls in Islamic countries revealed that many in those lands believed the tape to be a fake put together by the United States in order to place the blame on Arabs. In contrast, for America, this tape was proof positive that we were the victims of "A Great Evil". A sharp difference in perspective!

In January, President Bush resurrected the term "Axis powers" for the countries Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. "Axis powers" evokes a lot of emotion for Americans. And I have come to understand that there are some words on that tape that also evoke a lot of emotion – this time in the Islamic world.

Let me quote Osama bin Laden from that tape:

> "It is very clear that the West in general, spearheaded by America, holds an indescribable amount of crusader loathing for Islam....They hit the mosque while the Muslims were in prayer, killing 150 of them....This is the crusader loathing...."

And the excellent Lebanese journalist Amin Maalouf reminds us that the Turk Mehmet Ali Agca, unsuccessful assassin of Pope John Paul II in 1981, also wrote in his letters: "I have decided to kill John Paul II, supreme commander of the Crusades."

Crusades. Crusader loathing. For me, this was a jarring phrase. This is the crusades that brought Robin Hood back to prepare the way for King Richard's return to restore goodness and kindness to Sherwood Forest! Could any two perspectives on the Crusades be more different?

This Western notion of the goodness of the Crusades is not uncommon. The New Zealand historian John Saunders, for example, describes the Crusades very positively in the Encyclopedia Americana: "The Crusades form the great central epoch of medieval history. As a sustained effort of militant religious idealism on the part of so many nations they were unprecedented....To this day the word 'crusade' is used to signify any large cooperative enterprise undertaken in what is believed to be a worthy cause....Perhaps the greatest and least disputed achievement of the Crusades was to educate the Western nations in a sense of unity by welding them together in a common and persistent endeavor. It was no ordinary series of wars that could plant in the minds of men 'the idea of Europe' or the consciousness of being European."

For those of you with as weak a memory as I have, here is a brief synopsis of what the Crusades were.

First Crusade (1096-99). The First Crusade was launched by Pope Urban II in a speech at the Council of Clermont, France, on Nov. 27, 1095.

The Second Crusade (1147-49) had its immediate cause in the loss (1144) of Edessa to the Muslims of Mosul and Aleppo.

The Third Crusade (1188-92) was a response to the conquest (1187) of almost all of Palestine, including Jerusalem, by Sultan Saladin, who had consolidated Muslim power in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt.

For the Fourth Crusade (1202-04) Pope Innocent III took control, but it quickly turned into West conquering West. The Crusaders first attacked the Christian city of Zara, in Dalmatia. Then they sailed on to lay siege to Constantinople; it was looted—particularly for its treasures of relics.

The last of the major Crusades in the Middle East was the Eighth Crusade, 1270. In the meantime, during this century, Crusades were increasingly used by the papacy against foes in the West. This use of minor Crusades as a mere tool of power politics continued into the 14th and 15th centuries.

Slightly more objectively than Professor Saunders, Karlfried Froehlich writes, "The results of the Crusades are difficult to assess. In religious terms, they hardened Muslim attitudes toward Christians.... Politically, the Crusades did not effect much change. The Crusader states and the Latin Empire of Constantinople were short-lived.... The almost endless quarrels among rival lords in the Levant strengthened the Muslim conviction that the war could be carried farther west. In this sense, the Crusades led directly to the Turkish wars of later centuries, in which the Ottoman Empire expanded into the Balkans and threatened the very heart of Europe."

However short-lived were the military conquests and the political effects from the viewpoint of a Western historian, it is obvious from Osama bin Laden's quote that the Crusades had something about them that has fed two highly divergent popular views of history -- Western and Islamic.

It is easy for the West to believe that the West is the driving force, the central player, in the course of history. In the Dispatch on December 4, Glen Sheller quoted from a 1990 essay by Bernard Lewis in the Atlantic Monthly: "The reason Muslims have lost their pre-eminent place is not lack of modernization, but because of it. The defeat of the Turks in Vienna in 1683 started the decline. Efforts to adopt Western style military, government, and economic models have mired them in poverty ...." A very "West-centered view of Arab history.

I was recently reminded how West-centered our sense of history can be in an article in the Wilson Quarterly on the development of museums in the West.

For more than two centuries, museums have provided "a controlled vision of ordered progress that has fueled the extension of Western influence," writes Miriam R. Levin, an associate professor of history at Case Western Reserve University. This "mass of material stuff" revealed, she says, "the very drama that the Victorians saw unfolding in the world at large: history as a progress to their present moment."

So, not surprisingly, we in the West see things from our own perspective. Well, Kit Kat provides a good excuse to explore another perspective. The Crusades will be the object of our study. And I hope to show you how "crusader loathing" can resonate in Arab ears to the point where it can poison the lives of today's martyr heroes.

I won't spend a lot of time on Islamic history. I won't drag you through the Shiites versus the Sunnis, the Seljuks versus the Fatimids versus the Mamlukes versus the Ottomans. But some background is in order.

Hostility between the East and West isn't a norm historically. Peter Mansfield, a prolific writer about the Arab World, wrote in his book The Arabs that the Crusader settlements and their enemies were not typical. He writes, "The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was hardly representative of the best of medieval Christendom It was a rude military settlement, without the impulse, or an any rate without the time, for the creation of any achievement of civilization. Similarly the Saracen enemies they were fighting did not

represent the finer aspects of Islamic civilization. It was in Spain and Sicily that the two cultures fused to produce a remarkably mixed civilization which for a time survived the Christian reconquest. (The 13th century Norman kings of Sicily read and wrote Arabic [200 years after the First Crusade]. The greatest of Arab geographers produced his monumental treatise at the court of Roger II and dedicated it to him. In Spain, the mosque Library of Toledo became a center of Christian scholars after the Spanish reconquest, and it was here that Latin Christendom became familiar with Aristotle in Arabic translation and with the efforts of the great Arab Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides to reconcile Aristotle with the Old Testament.). "

He goes on " the crusades had a lasting adverse effect on Muslim society. Whereas the Muslims had been fairly tolerant of the Christians and Jews ... the brutal treatment of Muslims by the crusaders during the 3 centuries of their occupation made the Muslim leaders, especially the Mamluke sultans and later the Ottoman sultans, much harsher in their attitude toward anyone suspected of collaborating with the infidel invaders."

Ironically, the Crusaders were pikers compared to the Mongols, who invaded in the 13th century, eventually reaching through Persia and Syria to the Mediterranean. Those hordes destroyed all the "magnificent public works and the wonderful irrigation system of lower Mesopotamia."

A further irony is that the period of Christian political power was short. In contrast, the Turks ruled the Arab world for four centuries, yet, according to Mansfield, the Ottoman period is viewed by Arab as a "dark period in their history."

For the Arab, history ended with the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in the 13th century and of Egypt to the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century. To heighten the irony, William Cantwell Smith writes, "The fact that for at least two centuries Europe trembled with fear before the Muslim Turks, the conquerors of Byzantium, or that the Islamic faith saw one of its greatest periods of expansion [under the Ottomans] is not a source of pride to the Arabs."

So, despite their impermanence and remoteness, to the Arabs, the Crusades became larger than life. It was through the Crusades that the West, Christendom, first challenged the Islamic empire. And it was the Crusades that introduced widespread cruelty and intolerance to Christian and Muslim relations.

Why is tolerance so persistently the road not taken? How is it that to this day coexistence is overwhelmed by a sense that there can be only one winner, West or East, but not both?

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To understand this, let us look at the events of the first Crusade, the primary period of conquest, the event that set the tone for the following centuries. We will look at contemporary accounts by the Muslims and by the Franj, the name given to the Crusaders

by their Muslim enemies. And you will see the divergence of historical perspective that began with even the first chroniclers.

Let me preface this with the disclaimer that I am not an historian and there are, without doubt, many subtleties and qualifiers that go over my head – and many pronunciations that will grate on the educated ear. But indulge me, and I will try to quote extensively from experts, so that you may be your own judge of the argument. Our purpose is to journey through a piece of history and puzzle out how it has gained such a contradictory symbolism that has survived the centuries and possibly clouded perceptions ever since.

The Crusades began with a speech by Pope Urban II in 1095. The motives are debatable, but historians seen to agree that he wanted to redirect some Frankish fighting from inside Europe to outside Europe. In a letter to the people of Flanders, he wrote:

> We know you have already heard from the testimony of many that the frenzy of the barbarians has devastated the churches of God in the east, and has even – shame to say –seized into slavery the holy city of Christ, Jerusalem…"

Was this the status of Jerusalem at the time? How were Christians and Jews being treated? Was Urban II right? The quick answer is no. He was wrong.

There seems to have been a strong notion of interfaith co-existence long before the Crusades. The Lebanese journalist and historian Amin Maalouf recounts this story of the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 638 by the caliph Umar Ign al-Khattab:

> "Umar had entered Jerusalem astride his famous white camel, and the Greek patriarch of the holy city came forward to meet him. The caliph first assured him that the lives and property of the city's inhabitants would be respected, and then asked the patriarch to take him to visit the Christian holy places. …. The Frankish commanders, alas, lacked Umar's magnanimity. They celebrated their triumph with an ineffable orgy of killing, and then savagely ravaged the city they claimed to venerate….. The Arabs would later frequently invoke this event, to highlight the difference between their conduct and that of the Franj."

So Urban II was mistaken, but he persisted. Later, in 1096, he wrote to Bologna:

> "Know, then , that anyone who sets out on that journey, not out of lust for worldly advantage but only for the salvation of his soul and for the liberation of the Church, is remitted in entirety all penance for his sins."

Is this much different from the promises made to the World Trade Center bombers?

The Crusaders set out traveling through the Rhineland. The combination of a desperate need for supplies and the contemporary emphasis on the human suffering of Christ makes it apparent that, "to the crusaders, it was important to *avenge* Christ on those who were unfortunate enough to be regarded as his enemies."

The German chronicler Albert of Aachen recounts that the Jews of Mainz received protection from Bishop Ruothard. But the Crusaders attacked the Bishop's palace and "all who were found there were slaughtered."

As the Crusaders moved south along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, they encountered shortages of food and water. One of the most vivid, and recounted, images of the first Crusade is known as the cannibalism at Ma'arra.

The Franj accounts are treated as side boxes in the Western histories I examined:

> Guilbert of Nogent, Historia Hierosolymitana
> "When at Ma'arra – and wherever else – scraps of flesh from the pagans' bodies were discovered; when starvation forced our soldiers to the deed of cannibalism (which is known to have been carried out by the Franks only in secret and as rarely as possible), a hideous rumour spread among the infidel: that there were men in the Frankish army who fed very greedily on the bodies of Saracens. When they heard this the [crusaders], in order to impress the enemy, roasted the bruised body of a Turk over a fire as if it were meat for eating, in full view of the Turkish forces."
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> Fulcher of Chartres:
> "But after twenty days, our people suffered a severe famine. I shudder to speak of it: our people were so frenzied by hunger that they tore flesh from the buttocks of the Saracens who had died there, which they cooked and chewed and devoured with savage mouths, even then it had been roasted insufficiently in the fire. And the besiegers were more harmed than the besieged."

The Muslim view has more of an edge and an outrage missing from the Franj accounts. In fact, Amin Maalouf used the phrase "the Cannibals of Ma'arra" as the title for his principle chapter on the Crusaders' advance toward Jerusalem.

> And Maalouf chose to quote different Franj chroniclers than Western histories chose.
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> > The Frank Radulph of Caen:
> > "In Ma'arra our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking pots; they impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled."
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> Maalouf summarizes:
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> > "The inhabitants of towns and villages near Ma'arra would never read this confession by the Frankish chronicler....but they would never forget what

they had seen and heard. The memory of these atrocities, **preserved and transmitted by local poets and oral tradition,** shaped an image of the Franj that would not easily fade.

"The Ma'arra incident was to contribute to opening a chasm between the Arabs and the Franj that would not be bridged for centuries to come."

The unspeakable barbarism of the capture of Jerusalem is told in Franj accounts but without any sense of the irony of slaughter in the name of Christ. In fact, it is as if they were killing animals.

The Gesta Francorum reports:
"One of our knights, Lethold by name, ... chased after them, killing them and dismembering them as far as the Temple of Solomon. And in that place there was such slaughter that we were up to our ankles in their blood....In the morning our men climbed up cautiously on to the roof of the Temple and attacked the Saracens, both male and female, and beheaded them with unsheathed swords. ....Such a slaughter of pagans no one has ever seen or heard of; the pyres they made were like pyramids...."

In a letter from the leaders of the crusade to the pope, written in September 1099:

"If you want to know what was done to the enemies we found in the city, know this; that in the portico of Solomon and in his Temple, our men rode in the blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses."

The Arab version:
The Arab Ign al-Athir:
"The Franj arrived at dawn. It was carnage. For three days they put people to the sword, killing more than a hundred thousand people and taking many prisoners."

Suffice it to say that the barbarism was soon adopted by both sides. So much for the romance and ideals of a crusading knight.

What do we make of all this? What is it about the Crusades – this horrid but temporary period -- that has captured the Arab mind?

The Englishman, Peter Mansfield, believes that the emergence of Arab nationalism in the 20th century required a unifying myth and ideal. That ideal, and perhaps also its myth, is that the Arab world needs to recover the status and dignity it lost; indeed that it lost to the West; and it was the Crusaders who took it away, perhaps more accurately, who rubbed Arab noses into the reality of their decline. That Westerners are the sole

surviving conquerors: Mongols and Ottomans have long faded from power, leaving the West as the living symbol of foreign domination.

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Sadly, the modern history of the West has reinforced this image of Western domination and contempt for the lives and property of Arabs. And it reemerged with the French, the modern day Franj. In 1830, the French consul to Algeria, according to British witnesses, insulted the Dey (their name for the ruler) with words "of a very gross and irritating nature." The Dey's response was to strike the consul with a fly whisk. The French response was to land an invasion force of 37,000 men. Mosques were turned into churches, tribal lands were confiscated.

A ruthless repression continued for decades. A French historian recounted one of the expeditions of repression that were still occurring thirty years after occupation:

> "Our soldiers returning from the expedition were themselves ashamed .. about 18,000 trees had been cut down; houses had been burnt; women, children, and old men had been killed. The unfortunate women particularly excited cupidity by the habit of wearing silver ear-rings, leg-rings and arm-rings. These rings have no catches like French bracelets. Fastened in youth to the limbs of girls they cannot be removed when they are grown up. To get them off our soldiers used to cut off their limbs and leave them alive in this mutilated condition."

In 1839 the British conquered Aden from whence it extended British influence into the Arabian peninsula and into the Persian Gulf. In Lebanon, massacres of maronite Christians by the Druze in the civil war of 1840 prompted Emperor Napoleon III to land troops at Beirut. The five European powers (Britain, Russia, France, Austria, and Prussia) imposed Christian Maronite rule on this Ottoman enclave. It is worth noting that these Western conquests persisted into the 1950s in Algeria and Lebanon and elsewhere in the former Islamic empire. In the Gulf States, it lasted until 1971 when the British departed and the United Arab Emirates became a nation.

The Lebanese Amin Maalouf notes that the role of the West has become larger than life for the Arabs, and certainly to the neglect of other aspects of their history. Permit me to paraphrase.

Indeed, the Arabs <u>have</u> been ruled and dominated by foreigners, but this began long before the Crusades, since the early ninth century. In fact, the heroes in the war against the Crusaders were foreigners: Nur al-Din and Baybars were Turks; Saladin was a Kurd. And their leaders often never learned to speak Arabic: the sultan Mas'ud used an interpreter to speak with the Caliph and the Seljuks still couldn't speak Arabic 80 years after capturing Baghdad.

Maaluf summarizes: "dominated, oppressed, and derided, aliens in their own land, the Arabs were unable to continue to cultivate the cultural blossoms that had begun to flower in the seventh century."

But perhaps most importantly, Maaluf criticizes his own culture for creating a cultural vicious circle of isolation. While the West eagerly adopted language (zenith, nadir, azimuth, algebra, algorithm, cipher, alcohol, sugar, for example), they also absorbed modern and ancient knowledge. Greek wisdom was reintroduced to the West through the Arabs. Science, industry – the list of adopted knowledge and technology goes on and on.

In contrast, the Arab world turned inward as it perversely equated modernism and advancement with cooption to the West. Does modernization mean loss of Arab identity? This dilemma continues to this day, perhaps amplified in the last 35 years by the incredible growth of the Gulf States, where now a majority of the population is under 30 years of age and knows only the stresses of extraordinarily rapid economic change confronted with an all-too-common lag in social and institutional change.

I will let Amin Maalouf conclude for us: "The Arab world –simultaneously fascinated and terrified by the Franj, whom they encountered as barbarians and defeated, but who subsequently managed to dominate the earth – cannot bring itself to consider the Crusades a mere episode in the bygone past..... Today, on the eve of the third millennium, the political and religious leaders of the Arab world constantly refer to Saladin, to the fall of Jerusalem and its recapture. In the popular mind, and in some official discourse, too, Israel is regarded as a new Crusader state.... The Arabs perceived the Suez expedition of 1956 as [another] Crusade by the French and the English, similar to the Third Crusade in 1191 [to take back from Nasser what they once sought to take back from Saladin].

"It seems clear that the Arab East still sees the West as a natural enemy. Against that enemy, any hostile action – be it political, military, or based on oil – is considered no more than legitimate vengeance."

Legitimate vengeance. I hope you now understand this other perspective on the Crusades, King Richard, and Robin Hood. And it has been reinforced by some for over 900 years to create the imagery of Crusader loathing to the point that, for many people, this phrase legitimizes Osama bin Laden and who know who else.

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The screenwriters for The Count of Monte Cristo weren't able – or willing? – to create a hero who endured personal emptiness in a relentless pursuit of vengeance: a hero that is not fulfilled by his quest but instead is emptied of his humanity. Yet that is exactly what the novel's hero did – as well as today's martyr heroes, whether they be Arab, Irish, Hindu, Serbian ..... the list can go on and on.

For the Count of Monte Cristo and others like him, what must occur for them to let go of past affronts? Must all one's enemies be vanquished before the Counts of the world will relent? Will the road to reconciliation -- the road that moves on and leaves the Crusader horrors of the past behind; the road in the movie version of life – remain, in the real world, the road not taken?

For now, as Americans, we need to understand these different perspectives, but we do not have to accept perpetual revenge as the response. While the screenwriters made vengeance more palatable with their happy ending, we know that such happy endings are rarely what revenge brings.

Is it possible that our only positive response to all this madness for revenge lies in the ending Dumas himself wrote when the Count's vengeance, after 10 years, had finally spent itself?

Dumas closes his story saying, "all human wisdom is contained in the words "Wait and hope!'"

Perhaps, that is what we must do.

Thank you.