

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall

Asma Barlas

“The status quo,” intoned George W. Bush seriously from the G-8 summit in Canada on June 28, “is simply unacceptable.” Given the venue, he could have been speaking about the intolerable condition of the global economy, with its widening gap between the rich and the poor, the growing AIDS epidemic in the “Third World,” the criminal corruption and mismanagement of major corporations in the US with the potential to undermine its own economy, or a host of other urgent issues. But he was referring, instead, to the prospect of the Palestinians re-electing Yasser Arafat as their leader in January 2003.

Mr. Bush was responding to the fall-out from his June 24 speech in which he laid out a peace plan for the Middle East. As we know, in terms of his plan, the Palestinians would need to get rid of Mr. Arafat, elect new leaders and build new institutions if they want to enjoy the transitory benefits of a provisional Bantustan-type state. Barring some Church groups and local papers that optimistically (and one thinks opportunistically) have read great promise into that speech, everyone else, from Robert Fisk to mainstream papers that one can't accuse of having much sympathy for the Palestinians, was left aghast by it.

Indeed, for once, it wasn't just the indefatigable Fisk, known for his advocacy of even-handed big power policies in the region, who ventured criticism, but even news media not known for their impartiality towards the Palestinians (or Muslims). A *New York Times* editorial warned that “Mr. Bush seemed to be telling Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that he is free to reoccupy the entire West Bank until a new, democratic Palestine emerges. How the Palestinians can be expected to carry out elections or reform themselves while in a total lockdown by the Israeli military remains something of a mystery.” In a much more severe critique, columnist Paul Krugman chastised the father (Bush senior) for lacking in the “vision thing” and the son for being “less interested in the reality thing” (June 25th).

Surprisingly, the *Washington Post* also criticized Mr. Bush for placing “most of the onus on the Palestinians: The clear message was they shouldn't expect anything—not a state, not a provisional state, not an Israeli withdrawal—until they get rid of Yasser Arafat as their leader and clean up their collective act.” This “one-sided approach” might work, said the *Post*, “if Israel's government were committed to the two-state vision that Mr. Bush claimed as his own yesterday. . . . [but] Sharon has made clear that he sees a two-state solution many years distant at best. His government has shown no inclination to modify the settlement policy that makes an ultimate agreement ever more difficult.”

Across the continental US, on the West coast, a *Los Angeles Times* staff writer noted that “the clear victor [of Mr. Bush's speech] was Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Israeli officials could barely contain their delight at Bush's game plan for the Middle East and his call for new Palestinian leadership. The consensus among analysts in Jerusalem was that it could practically have been drafted by Sharon himself” (June 25th).

Criticisms of Mr. Bush's speech also cropped up on the net. A Palestinian professor at Yale pointed out, for instance, that Mr. Bush mentioned terrorism against Israel 18 times, compared to zero times against the Palestinians. Similarly, he referred to Israel's security needs seven times, but not once to those of the Palestinians. Also missing from his speech were any references to Israeli colonialism or its lack of democracy, the Arab or European peace efforts, US tax funding of Israel, human rights, or international law.

Astounding (and disturbing) as these facts are, however, they are hardly new. Chomsky and Said—to name two of the best-known US academics—have been writing about US biases towards Israel and blindness towards the Palestinians (and Muslims) for decades. What may be newsworthy is that segments of the mainstream media have begun to find some US and Israeli policies unpalatable as well (for which the media is being denounced as pro-Palestinian by some). This is no small thing in a country where historically Israel has been re-presented as the blameless and irreproachable ally that one can only criticize at the risk of opening oneself to charges of anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, it is a different aspect of Mr. Bush's demand that the Palestinians elect new leaders in fair elections that I want to comment on. It isn't only that, of all the things that a reasonable person could find deplorable, Arafat's re-election wouldn't qualify as the most monstrous. Certainly, it can't be worse than Sharon's election (he is, if anything, older than Arafat and more deeply implicated in state sponsored terrorism as is evident from attempts in Belgium to indict him as a war criminal for the massacres at Sabra and Shatilla). It isn't even Mr. Bush's singular capacity for saying the most profoundly inane things with a straight face and without the slightest hint of irony or self-awareness that I want to comment on. Rather, I want to draw attention to the questionable nature of the elections that catapulted Mr. Bush himself to power as well as the fact that the two most powerful members of his own cabinet who are credited with running the country—Cheney and Rumsfeld—are old, old, old, hands from his father's administration.

It seems Mr. Bush wants new blood for the Palestinians, the Iraqis, and anyone else who doesn't toe his line, but not for the US; *we* are only fit for the old wine in old bottles! In the US, the "oldies but goodies" embody experience and wisdom and in others, dead wood and old tyrants. Mr. Bush's administration should not be wanting to make the world over in its own image unless, of course, it finds itself the fairest of all; in which case, I'd love to see the mirror in which it has been looking.

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