

Deeds Speak Louder than Words

The collapse of the twin towers like a deck of cards symbolized the collapse of U.S. foreign policy in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The tragic loss of thousands of innocent U.S. lives, and those of other nationals, exposed the fragility of security and safety for a superpower involved in policies that perpetuate inequities and exacerbate regional conflicts. Wars that the United States has been waging in the region, through the bombing of and embargo against Iraq or through support for Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, have reached the United States. Ultimately, U.S. military prowess could not stop the continued bleeding in the Middle East from spilling onto U.S. shores. Neither U.S. control over the flow of news, nor the efforts of Pentagon and Madison Avenue spin doctors, can ease the resentment of U.S. policies and actions that have affected the lives, hearts, and minds of the people of the region.

Of course, the United States does not see itself or the terrorist attacks of September 11 this way—despite the prevalence abroad of this perception of the United States. In the era of “us against them” and the absolute battle between “good and evil,” the United States has no room for another worldview and little if any inclination to consider the victims of U.S. economic, political, and military dominance. Most alarmingly, the United States fails to realize that a foreign policy based solely on such principles of power and dominance leaves no room for legitimate political opposition, driving all discontent into the camp of extremists and terrorists.

The malcontents' heinous response—seen by millions across the world as the horrific images unfolded—was meaningless vengeance against innocents. It did nothing to further the cause of justice of those whom U.S. poli-

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cies have aggrieved. Just as tragic, though, and many times more numerous are the deaths of children in Iraq, Palestine, and now Afghanistan, which have received far less attention and sympathy from the U.S. media and far too much indifference from Washington. Recognition of the equality of human suffering, or taking accountability for the actions that help cause it, has given way to the ruthless logic of power. This state of affairs is now true for both the United States and its terrorist enemies.

The collision of the hijacked planes with the twin towers was an ugly metaphor of how violent confrontation has substituted for dialogue and meaningful communication. Public policy, at least in theory, is presumed to enable such communication. Yet, unless the United States reexamines its foreign policies and goals, public policy will have been reduced to propaganda that marginalizes and dehumanizes “the other,” consequently precluding meaningful dialogue and communication.

The Myopia of Power

Watching the United States, especially its politicians, react has been a lesson in the myopia of power and might in the face of a challenge to its hegemony. The United States is realizing that huge dark spots tarnish its world image, especially in the Middle East, but the United States has not addressed this monumental problem by reexamining the basic assumption of its policies. Instead, it has sought new means to reassert its control. Watching and listening to the ongoing discourse on U.S. public policy to win “the hearts and minds” of Arabs and Muslims has been amusing and at times absurd. Its discourse, and the policies that the United States has carried out, are based on the erroneous assumption that extremists in the region misunderstand and deliberately distort U.S. goals and actions. The remedy, therefore, has been to hire Charlotte Beers, a high-powered advertising agent, to the new position of undersecretary of state for public diplomacy to repack-age the U.S. image and policies in a manner more appealing to a presumably alien and less intelligent culture.

More significant are the assumptions that lie beneath these views and conclusions. As many pundits who feel entitled to explain Arabs and Muslims to the U.S. public have repeatedly pontificated, the problem does not lie in U.S. actions but in Arab and Muslim inability to understand and appreciate modernity and the values the United States represents. Accordingly, the U.S. ideals of freedom, democracy, and justice, as embodied in a system that secures free trade and capitalism, threaten those people who resent the United States. Hence, the United States has no choice but to ensure its military, political, and economic hegemony, an idea popularized by

the self-appointed spokesman for U.S. domination of global markets, Thomas Friedman, who wrote:

For globalization to work, America must not be afraid to act as the almighty superpower that it is ... the hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist—McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the U.S. Air Force F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps.¹

Seen in this light, the main and perhaps sole function of U.S. public policies is to justify U.S. dominance and actions, including war, as necessary in the fight against the enemies of freedom. These ideas have been echoed in many essays, columns, and articles; the section "What to Do?" in Farid Zakaria's "The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?" is a good example.²

In other words, as President George W. Bush has stated repeatedly, and as many pundits have echoed, the fight "between good and evil" justifies the policies. Thus, even when U.S. officials appear on Arab satellite television supposedly to reach out to people in the region by emphasizing respect for Islamic religion and societies, the unapprized grievances of the people are not seriously acknowledged. In the rare times that these concerns are mentioned, albeit vaguely, such acknowledgment falls short of recognizing the U.S. role in practicing or supporting violence through its allies, such as Israel, against Arabs. For example, although Secretary of State Colin Powell announced, "The occupation must end," he exclusively blamed the violence on the Palestinians without taking accountability for the U.S. military support of the Israeli occupation army. "Whatever the sources of Palestinian frustration and anger under occupation, the Intifada is now mired in the quicksand of self-defeating violence and terror directed against Israel," Powell said in the short-lived administration's "peace proposal" for a Palestinian state. In the few paragraphs regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Powell used the words "terror" or "terrorists" six times exclusively describing Palestinian actions.³

U.S. control of the flow of news cannot ease the resentment toward U.S. policies.

The Failure of U.S. Policy

U.S. policy has been an utter failure in the Arab and Muslim world. In his September 20 speech to the nation, Bush defined the U.S. attitude to the rest of the world—but particularly toward Arabs and Muslims—in unequivocal

terms. "Either you are with us or with the terrorists," Bush warned the rest of the world in his speech to a joint session of Congress. No spin can camouflage or sweeten such threatening words that carry the weight of U.S. military, political, and economic might. Such a polarized view of the world leaves no room for dialogue or for a search for a middle ground that addresses the threat of terrorism and the underlying problems of political and economic inequities. Accordingly, the world is strictly divided between Washington and "terrorists," between "good" and "evil." The only middle road tolerated, albeit temporarily,

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is when a country renders some support for the U.S. war effort. The United States, however, demands that countries go "all the way" in their support, or threats against them may resurface. A case in point is Iran, which allowed the United States to use Iranian aircraft to transfer military equipment and troops to Afghanistan, but was nevertheless accused by Bush in his State of the Union address of being part of "an axis of evil [along

with Iraq and North Korea], arming to threaten the peace of the world."⁴

The United States places individuals, leaders, and even nations who oppose its policy in the "other" camp that will be bombed or whose governments will be toppled. In a message meant for any country that supports terrorism, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz declared, "You are setting yourselves up to suffer the same as Afghanistan."⁵ In a press conference shortly after September 11, Wolfowitz talked of the necessity "of ending nations" that sponsor terrorism and, although Powell reportedly opposed his hard line, the world heard the message loud and clear.⁶

I deliberately place "terrorists" in quotes because the word has come to describe all enemies or opponents who resist U.S. policies or those of its allies. (The State Department mainly applies it to groups that practice violence against civilians to attain their goals, but any definition of state-sponsored terrorism against civilians, especially that perpetuated by the United States or its allies such as Israel, is absent.) The selective political use of the term by the United States to justify its policies and actions has generated distrust and resentment among Arabs and Muslims. Such a stark division of the world at once marginalizes and even demonizes the voices of discontent. As a result, a combination of the U.S. exercise of power and of Arab rulers' suppression of political dissent, a suppression that the United States often backs, has always ignored and eventually drowned out popular sentiments in the Arab world.

An examination of U.S. foreign policy throughout and since the Persian Gulf War gives a clear glimpse into how the United States relies on sheer

economic and military power to impose its policies in the region. At no point did Washington stop to give serious consideration to the message of the millions of Arabs who protested against the war on Iraq and the continued bombing and sanctions against that beleaguered country. U.S. public diplomacy focused only on demonizing Saddam Hussein, while ignoring the increasingly angry protests in the Arab and Muslim world over the suffering of ordinary Iraqis. Saddam was not by any means the credible spokesman for legitimate Arab and Muslim concerns, but public policymakers in the United States decided to kill the message with the messenger.

Public policy strategists, it seems, never noticed that demonizing Saddam has never succeeded in either marketing the war or the sanctions or in quelling growing resentment toward the United States in the Arab world. U.S. military force, accompanied by a public policy of denial of concerns of “the other,” only deepened the feeling of humiliation, despair, and powerlessness among Arabs and Muslims.

The continued saga and death in Iraq is a daily reaffirmation of U.S. hostility and aggression against an Arab nation. Blaming Saddam for the death of children due to the most stringent economic sanctions ever imposed may play well in Washington, but the receptive Arab and Muslim audiences are small. The notion of a collective punishment of Iraqi civilians for their leaders’ deeds is not only unacceptable among Arabs and Muslims, but a reaffirmation of the U.S. disregard for Arab lives. Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright’s infamous response in a U.S. televised interview—when asked whether the deaths of thousands of Iraqi children was “worth it” to keep sanctions in place, she responded with an unqualified “yes”—is etched in Arab memory.

If Albright’s blunt language was a diplomatic blunder, however, the U.S. role in the Israeli-Arab peace negotiations shows the limits of positive spin when the actual policy does nothing to improve the lives of the people on the ground. In a March 1990 speech, President George H. W. Bush seized the moment of U.S. victory against Iraq to make a grand gesture to the Arab world. His commitment to bring about peace in the region indicated that Washington was aware that only a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict could ease the impact of the crushing Iraqi defeat on the Arab world and ensure stability.

The great wheels of U.S. statecraft, in the wake of which scores of pundits followed, churned out endless messages of peace, security, and even prosperity for the region. The message for public consumption in the West was that the ruins of war would lead all to grasp for the olive branch. In the realpolitik behind this facade of U.S. public policy, U.S. arm-twisting convinced Arab leaders to enter the process. In the end, a state of shock, defeat, and humiliation coerced a skeptical Arab world to accept the U.S.-imposed terms for negotia-

tions with Israel while their interests were effectively dismissed. The United States and Israel rejected Arab demands for an Israeli commitment to stop settlement building, home demolition, expropriation of lands, and detention and deportation of Palestinians, although all are prerequisites under the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention. Demands that talks lead to the clear establishment of a Palestinian state and the end of Israeli occupation of Arab lands were also denied, plunging Arabs into an open-ended process.

Although Arab rulers had every reason to ingratiate themselves with the supreme power in return for economic and military dividends, the reaction of the Arab people was a combination of resentful submission and a desperate hope to survive their crushing defeat after the Gulf War. Even those governments that allied themselves with the United States during the war found a deaf ear in Washington. Israel summarily rejected their attempts to improve the terms of negotiation as coming from the “losing” camp. Many clutched to the promise of prosperity as compensation for lost dreams, while Palestinians looked for a flicker of freedom.

The euphoria that accompanied the signing of the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was a statement, particularly by Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, of a yearning for independence. The excitement and support, however, was based on false expectations, manipulated by some PLO officials and world leaders, of the beginning of freedom and peace. Throughout my travels in the Palestinian territories in the two years that followed the Oslo signing, the Declaration of Principles was largely interpreted as a guarantee of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Refugees were less enthusiastic, feeling that the PLO leadership had betrayed them because the Oslo agreement did not address the right of return.

As effective Israeli control over the Palestinian territories continued, it became clear that expectations built up by the historic handshake did not stand the test of time. Israeli governments continued expanding settlements and refused to release most Palestinian prisoners. Israel continued to control freedom of movement, including that of PLO leader Yasir Arafat. In the wider regional context, the key to U.S. aid—as well as entry through the gates of globalization, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO)—was presented as acceptance of peace agreements with Israel. In the case of Jordan, it was free-trade zones that qualified for exemption of import duties. The caveat for entry into these global “clubs” has been and remains Arab consent to “normalization” with Israel.

The Oslo accords, however, and the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty—each with their promise of an economic “peace dividend”—were not enough to win popular support for normalizing ties with Israel. The United States overlooked the obvious: no broader economic and cultural ties could emerge as

long as the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, Syria (the Golan Heights), and Lebanon (until its withdrawal in 1998) continued. Incremental Israeli redeployments from the occupied areas, and sustaining the negotiation process through waves of violence, were not enough to facilitate the broadening of peace ties in the region.

In Arab eyes, the tale of the peace process has become a definitive reaffirmation of how one-sided and pro-Israeli U.S. policies and objectives have become. From then–Secretary of State James Baker’s to then-President Bill Clinton’s stance in Camp David and finally Bush’s support for Ariel Sharon, Washington’s consistent policy has been to guarantee Israeli military superiority and security goals. Increased U.S. military support of Israel, security demands the United States made to the Palestinians, and the U.S. blind eye to expanding Jewish settlements contradicted public statements in support of Palestinian rights.

U.S. policy has been an utter failure in the Arab and Muslim world.

On the international level, Washington blocked many attempts by the United Nations (UN) to enforce an end to settlement building. In 1999 the United States successfully thwarted a UN resolution to convene a meeting for the contracting parties to the fourth Geneva Convention, scheduled for July 15, regarding the Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian Arab lands. In testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, David Welch, assistant secretary of state for international organizations, boasted of the then-ongoing efforts. “The [United States] voted against this resolution. ... We have worked strenuously in the days since its adoption—up to and including today—to cancel or delay this ill-conceived conference.”⁷

The Camp David talks of July 2000 ultimately shattered any remaining illusions and hopes for the Palestinians. Camp David may continue to be heralded in the United States as a missed historic opportunity, but with the exception of the elite among pro-U.S. allies, Camp David is seen in the Arab world to represent the bankruptcy and incredibility of U.S. foreign and public policy. The myth created around Camp David serves the U.S. and Israeli objective of blaming the Palestinians. If judged by the future it provided for the Palestinian people, however, that interpretation does not withstand scrutiny. The alleged offer from Israel’s then–Prime Minister Ehud Barak boiled down to a noncontiguous “state” devoid of sovereignty in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Barak proposal involved a division of East Jerusalem, as opposed to the Palestinian vision of two capitals in East and West Jerusalem. The offer would have kept the city under Israeli sovereignty, and Israel would have retained control over Palestinian borders and

freedom of movement and the area's vital water resources. Hardly any Palestinian could have accepted this offer; indeed, Arafat told Clinton during the tense hours of negotiation that, if the Palestinians accepted, the U.S. president would soon be attending the funeral of another Arab leader.

The Arab world saw full-fledged U.S. support for the Israeli proposal and the consequent vilification of Arafat for refusing it as proof that Washington

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had never envisioned freedom for the Palestinians. The fact that the proposal fell far short of the minimum provided by UN resolutions reinforced the Arab view of U.S. double standards and disdain for international law when applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Clinton's two farewell letters to the Palestinian and Israeli people removed any doubt about his administration's bias against the Palestinians. Clinton opened his letter to the Israeli peoples by pointing out, "I have ex-

panded our special strategic relationship and helped protect and enhance your security." He announced that he had recommended that Israel become "among the first, if not the first" foreign buyer of the advanced F-22 fighter aircraft when it became available for sale. He concluded by pledging, "I will be standing with you as strong and faithful a friend as I am today."⁸

Clinton's underlying argument that Israeli security comes first and foremost is, ironically, consistent with the Arab view that the so-called peace process is little more than a security operation to control the Palestinian population. In the two important agreements brokered by the Clinton administration—the 1997 Hebron Protocols and the 1998 Wye River Memorandum—this position was, in fact, consolidated as a policy and function of the "peace process." The gist of U.S. policy was summarized in the letter of assurance that then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher sent to Israel and that was included in the addendum of the Hebron Protocols:

The key element in our approach to peace, including the negotiations and implementation of agreements between Israel and its Arab partners, has always been a recognition of Israel's security requirement. Moreover, a hallmark of our policy remains our commitment to work cooperatively to seek the needs that Israel identifies.⁹

The next day, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the Knesset that the Hebron agreements clarified that implementation of redeployments (of Israeli troops) must be an Israeli decision and that "this decision must comply with Israel's security considerations as Israel sees fit."¹⁰

Behind the scenes and away from public diplomacy, the U.S. team entrusted with mediation was emerging as a bidder for Israeli positions in a

manner that astounded even the most lenient Palestinian negotiators. Most notable among these bidders were the former special envoy for the Middle East peace process, Dennis Ross, and Martin Indyk, who rotated as ambassador to Israel and assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs during the Clinton years.

The recruitment by Clinton almost immediately after his inauguration of Indyk, a former official for AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) and head of the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy from 1985 to 1992, gave many in the Arab world a bad premonition of the administration policies to come. Ross, an old hand in the State Department, was a behind-the-scenes silent type with well-known sympathies for Israel. Palestinian frustration with Ross's open bias was the subject of tens of articles in the Arab media throughout the negotiation process. Since their departure from public office, both men have been leading and outspoken apologists for Israeli policies in public forums and the media.

In retrospect, public policymakers seem to have confused grand gestures with actual policies. For example, the fact that Clinton often received Arafat in the White House was used to illustrate the administration's open-mindedness to, if not sympathy for, the Palestinians. Yet, for some Palestinians watching Arafat in the White House and Camp David, the hard facts of U.S. pressure on the Palestinian leader to crack down on its militants while Israel continued its punitive measures against the Palestinians soon replaced the initial excitement.

This lack of evenhandedness is seen as an act of open hostility in the Arab world. During the last decade, U.S. officials have at most expressed regret at Israeli killings of Palestinian civilians, but have never offered condolences to their families (as compared to the families of Israeli victims of suicide bombers) much less condemned Israel for these actions. Instead, this U.S. exoneration of Israel is taken as further evidence of intentional U.S. humiliation of the Arab world.

Same Story, Different Century

During the 2000 presidential campaign, both Bush and Vice President Al Gore seemed oblivious, if not indifferent, to the message they were sending to Arabs and Muslims as they competed to outbid each other in support of Israel during the annual conference for AIPAC. The very fact that major presidential candidates' appearances could take place at such a biased forum is itself an example of the entrenched U.S. establishment.

This animosity had become more open and strident since the beginning of the current Intifada in September 2001. The Intifada had effectively un-

dermined the whole premise behind the U.S.-led peace process that emphasized Israeli security as its driving force preceding an end to the occupation—proving that the first goal cannot be attained without achieving the latter. The U.S. response—officially and through its pundits—initially dismissed the Intifada as violence that should be stopped and finally condemned it as a “campaign of terror.” In contrast, statements regarding Israeli army violence have reflected U.S. understanding or, at most, calls for “restraint.” Even when the administration intervened to get Sharon to withdraw tanks from the areas he recaptured, the United States did not condemn Israel when it took its army 10 days to begin pulling out.

Such policies go far beyond bias. In fact, they sanction violence by an occupying force while delegitimizing resistance by the people under occupation. In the Middle East, these actions are interpreted as denouncing Palestinian violence as “terrorism” while refusing even to acknowledge state terrorism practiced by Israel against people under occupation. No campaign to “improve the U.S. image” in the Arab world could change this perception. In an interview with Al Jazeera television, Ross confirmed Arab perceptions by insisting that suicide bombers “are murderers of children” and that Israel does not deliberately target civilians. Such pronouncements utterly contradict the findings of major international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Physicians for Human Rights, and the respected Israeli group B’tselem, that Israel has used excessive force, causing the death and maiming of Palestinian protesters and stone throwers. According to these organizations, Israeli soldiers were using high-velocity bullets and aiming at protesters in situations where the soldiers’ lives were not threatened. With the exception of a few reports in the U.S. press, both the media and the government ignore the conclusions of human rights reports, again reaffirming the perceived notion of disrespect for Arab lives.

Getting Worse, Not Better

In the aftermath of September 11, the gap between the United States and the Arab and Muslim world reached unprecedented proportions. Overestimating the damage done by Bush’s description of the declared war on terrorism as a “crusade” is difficult. In one word—its later retraction carried far less weight—Bush conjured deep-seated feelings of resentment and anger that had been built up against the legacy of the bloody European Crusades. For many in the region, it underscored Western colonialism, Israeli occupation, and the current U.S. domination. Ironically, Bush confirmed what extremist Islamic fundamentalists and many disgruntled Arabs and Muslims have claimed for decades: the United States represented latter-day crusad-

ers against Muslims. Even Christian thinkers in the region who were pioneers in Pan-Arab and leftist ideologies had always denounced and warned against Western colonialism and Western animosity toward Islam as a pillar of Arab culture. Especially after the start of the bombing of Afghanistan, the stepped-up threats to attack Iraq and other Arab countries, the unequivocal endorsement of Sharon's position, and the naming of Palestinian organizations as targets in the war against terror, the damage control that followed Bush's gaffe had limited effect.

The Arab world has watched the detention of thousands of Middle Eastern men in the United States and the demonizing of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. media with alarm and anger and as indications of growing U.S. hostility. A review of post-September 11 foreign and public policy shows that the United States has lost more Arab and Muslim hearts and minds than it has gained, aggravating an already simmering resentment.

The only apparent foreign policy shift was very short-lived and did not stand the test of wavering U.S. credibility. Few in the Arab world believed that the United States was preparing a policy initiative regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict prior to the September 11 attack. Yet many, mostly Arab, governments and some media columnists viewed this admission as a welcome realization of the centrality of an Arab-Israeli peace to ending both violence in the region and threats against the United States. Bush's UN statement referring to Palestinian statehood and, more significantly, Powell's speech revived debate in the Arab world about a possible positive U.S. role. Powell's speech was important in terms of public and foreign policy for unequivocally stressing the need to end the Israeli occupation and pronouncing a Palestinian state as the outcome of negotiations. With the exception of some Arab governments, Arab reaction was hardly enthusiastic. In part, this response resulted from the serious erosion of U.S. credibility, but also because the creation of a Palestinian state was conditional on the cessation of Palestinian violence although the state's shape and jurisdiction would be subject to negotiation with Israel.

Most Arabs and Muslims viewed the Powell initiative as an attempt to placate their anger about the declared war on Afghanistan and other Muslim countries deemed to harbor terrorists. More significantly, promises for a Palestinian state had lost their appeal since Camp David had revealed that such a description meant a sovereignless entity. Even if Powell himself was believed, people in the region are aware of press reports suggesting a rift between Powell and both Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. Distrust of the latter two runs deep. Thus,

The U.S. role in the Israeli-Arab peace negotiations shows the limits of positive spin.

when the United States abandoned its “initiative” and stood firmly behind Sharon, the move was interpreted as either a defeat for Powell or proof of U.S. insincerity, or both. U.S. arguments that the spate of attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad had sabotaged its peace gesture did make inroads within the Arab governments, the Palestinian Authority, and some intellectuals, but even Arab and Muslim opponents of suicide bombings and attacks against Israeli civilians did not buy into the U.S. claims. The administration’s open support for Sharon without any pretense of evenhandedness consolidated an image of the United States as an enemy of the Palestinians—an image

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widely expressed in the Arab and Muslim world, which a U.S. public relations campaign could hardly counter.

Furthermore, the ascension into the lime-light of anti-Iraq hawks, including Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and James Woolsey, among others, completed a picture of the destructive U.S. intentions toward the Arab world. The U.S. government and spin masters are meanwhile rubbing salt in a festering wound by ignoring—if not dismissing—misgivings of

pro-U.S. Arab governments and strong popular opposition to a military assault on Iraq. Talk about Saddam as a threat to regional security is juxtaposed with Sharon’s ruthless suppression of the Palestinians. The West, especially the United States and Great Britain, have lost moral ground as the sanctions continue to kill civilians in Iraq. In short, an attack on Iraq will be no more than an unwarranted U.S. attempt to flex its muscle and to augment Israeli regional supremacy further.

U.S. and British actions have also been seen in a new context since the bombing of Afghanistan. In addition to popular opposition of the bombing of Afghanistan as a response to the terrorist attacks in the United States, Arabs and Muslims are aware of reports of rising civilian casualties that Arab and even European media cover. The crushing of the prisoner uprising in Mazar-e Sharif, repeated bombing of villages, use of cluster bombs, and horrifying treatment of captured Taliban and Al Qaeda members help feed existing anger. From the Middle Eastern perspective, U.S. actions look more like a vicious act of vengeance than U.S. claims of a quest for justice.

From the very outset, the U.S. propaganda war found little audience among Arabs and Muslims. The U.S. record of double standards on human rights and international law has been deeply entrenched in the Arab psyche. The September 11 tragedy invoked wide and deep sympathies for the casualties and survivors of the terrorist attacks, but the U.S. response has reasserted the U.S. image as a ruthless power. The U.S. media’s repeated

narration of the lives and experiences of the victims and the survivors of the September 11 attacks—a crucial testimony to the loss and suffering—ironically brought into sharp relief U.S. indifference to the humanity of the victims of its own policies. Although U.S. deaths are human losses, Palestinian, Iraqi, and Afghan casualties are mere statistics—often unreported at that.

Bin Laden's Role

In his first taped broadcast since the September 11 attacks, aired on Al Jazeera on October 6, Osama bin Laden captured the depth of the sense that the United States devalues the lives of “the other.” Bin Laden started by invoking the memory of victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then drew on an Arab proverb that roughly translates, “Massacres committed by the powerful against the weak are justified acts while reactions by the oppressed are acts of crime.” These words express the sentiments of many average Arabs and Muslims, including those who loathe bin Laden. In its campaign to censor bin Laden tapes, the U.S. government was missing the point: bin Laden himself does not muster a majority following in the Arab and Muslim world, but his articulation of grievances felt across the region echoes feelings that Washington continues to ignore.

Like Saddam before him, bin Laden is not a legitimate spokesman for Arab and Muslim causes, even less so than Saddam. Yet, both men were able to seize moments of focused attention—regardless of the cynical motivation behind their actions—and give public voice to people's grievances. Thus, while most Arab leaders are struggling to appease U.S. interests, any voice raised in opposition to oppressive U.S. and Israeli policies resonates widely in the region.

The typical U.S. reaction is that of Rumsfeld's dismissal as propaganda of bin Laden's claims in his last videotape that U.S. bombings had inflicted high Afghan civilian casualties. When a respected Lebanese-American writer, Assad Abu Khalil, a declared atheist and opponent of religious extremism, tried to explain on MSNBC that bin Laden's reference to Afghan victims of the bombing rings true to Arab and Muslim ears, the host asked him pointedly, in a question reminiscent of Joseph McCarthy, if Abu Khalil was himself a bin Laden sympathizer. These official and media tactics of vilification of dissenting voices may succeed in the short term to drown out Arab and Muslim grievances. In the long run, they will only serve to deepen a sense of injustice and humiliation.

Attempts to link Arab and Muslim opposition voices with bin Laden and terrorism is another manifestation of myopic U.S. public policy. The United States must understand that it cannot win by delegitimizing deep-rooted

concerns in the region that are the heart of Arab and Muslim disaffection, which is exactly how the U.S. government and most of the media have responded since September 11. Countless pages in the press and hours on television and radio, with some exceptions, were dedicated to interpretations that trivialize these grievances and justify the fundamental assumptions of past and current U.S. policies and actions.

Apologists for Hegemony

Two examples of these rationalizations, promoted by the most influential pundits, need to be dissected and refuted. The first is that repressive Arab governments deliberately foment hatred of the United States and Israel to deflect criticism of their own corruption and incompetence. Accordingly, animosities portrayed by Arabs and Muslims are largely a function of systematic brainwashing by the state-controlled Arab media. Although Arab rulers have used the Arab-Israeli conflict to avoid democratization, reforms, and accountability, this fact does not minimize the intensity of Arab and Muslim resentment of the Israeli occupation and U.S. policies. For starters, most Arab and Muslim opposition parties, as well as critical intellectuals, repeatedly attack Arab governments for their subservience to U.S. policies and inaction toward Israel. In most cases, criticism of Israel and the United States reflects disenchantment with, if not an indictment of, pro-U.S. states in the region.

More significantly, Arab governments, especially U.S. allies, have often suppressed political and press freedoms to curb criticism of their own support for U.S. policies. For example, since the beginning of the Intifada and the consequent increased calls for annulling Jordan's peace treaty with Israel, the Jordanian government has imposed severe restrictions on demonstrations, rallies, and political meetings. After Jordan declared its support for the U.S. "war against terror," the noose was tightened, as the government banned demonstrations and introduced draconian penal codes to prosecute journalists who "damage the country's reputation." The wording is understood to mean punishment for those who raise doubts in the West about Jordan's commitment to U.S. objectives.

Since September 11, more columnists and television and radio analysts are blaming the United States for supporting repressive regimes in the Arab and Muslim worlds, but they fail to question U.S. pressure on leaders to defy the will of their peoples. U.S. coercion has rarely failed in getting already authoritarian and insecure Arab governments to curb popular dissent to appease U.S. and Western demands. These leaders are equally accountable—even considering the expected U.S. punishment that comes with defiance—for choosing their own survival at the expense of their people's aspirations.

Arab leaders' disregard of public opinion, however, has always endeared them to Washington, while any minimal attempt at a balancing act—as we are witnessing now—brings the wrath of the U.S. government and media. Analysts and talking heads ironically proceed to attack repression in Saudi Arabia and Egypt while expressing anger at these governments' inability to silence opposition to Israel and the United States. The epitome of U.S. hypocrisy was its intervention with Qatar to censor Al Jazeera, accompanied by a disparaging and slanderous media campaign to discredit a forum for free statement in the Arab world. The eventual bombing and destruction of the station's office in Kabul on November 20, 2001, which could not have been a "mistake," symbolized for the region the true U.S. position on freedom of speech and the press. The United States has no tolerance for any narrative other than the one disseminated by U.S. media, which has come to echo the official line.

Another irony of the media-distorted portrayal of Arab and Muslim views is the way the United States uses the region's lack of democracy and prevalence of social inequity to exonerate its foreign policy. Poverty and lack of participation and representation are indeed a failure of Arab and Muslim states; the best thinkers in the region have repeatedly said that these phenomena help breed extremism. Most Western apologists for U.S. hegemony, however, ignore two important factors, the first being the U.S. collaborative role with some Arab and Muslim governments in fomenting and funding Islamic fundamentalist and even fanatic movements—not only having mobilized resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan but also in countering and weakening secular nationalist and leftist movements across the region. The U.S. Cold War mentality, with its determination to crush leftist and communist trends, created an uncontrollable monster of fanaticism that feeds on the despair of the poor and the oppressed. The second factor that pundits ignore is that U.S. policies have not encouraged redistribution of wealth or other means of bridging the gaps. By focusing on controlling the flow of cheap oil and prodding Arab governments to endorse International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and finally WTO prerequisites, Washington has aggravated the problems of poverty and deprivation. Its heralded programs to finance small businesses with microcredits are a drop in a bucket; they do not compare with the benefits of using vast resources for genuine development. How would the same pundits react if a progressive, democratic ruler took power in Saudi Arabia? A representative government in such a key country would more likely reflect popular demands to

Since September 11, the U.S. has lost more Arab and Muslim hearts and minds than it has gained.

adopt a different policy regarding the oil flow and the wealth generated from it. Would the United States react by supporting such a government, or back a coup similar to the one that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile?

Public policymakers must think hard before appearing on Arab television networks and proceeding with plans for U.S. government-funded Middle East television and radio networks to promote U.S. policies and repeat claims about Washington's commitment to justice, equality, and human rights. The targeted audience will be evaluating the words not in terms of the eloquence or proficiency of the speaker's Arabic but in terms of present and past U.S. actions.

Notes

1. Thomas Friedman, "A Manifesto for the Fast World," *New York Times*, March 28, 1999, sec. 6, p. 40. Friedman repeats the argument in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), p. 50.
2. Fareed Zakaria, "Why Do They Hate Us," *Newsweek*, October 15, 2001, pp. 22–40 ("What to Do?" section can be found on pp. 36–40).
3. Colin Powell, McConnell Center for Political Leadership, University of Louisville, Ky., November 19, 2001.
4. The campaign started in the second week of January and continues in the press to the date of this writing.
5. Associated Press, December 4, 2001 (dispatch from MacDill Airforce Base, Tampa, Fla.).
6. Warren P. Strobel, "Bush Given Conflicting Advice; Some Aides Want U.S. to Topple Governments," *Seattle Times*, September 18, 2001.
7. For more details, see Welch's full testimony from July 14, 1999, on the Web archives of the Department of State, www.state.gov.
8. Bill Clinton, "Open Letter of President Clinton to the People of Israel," January 19, 2001, www.usembassy.ro/USIS/Washington-File/500/01-01-19/eur505.htm (accessed January 20, 2002).
9. Warren Christopher, "Letter to Be Provided by U.S. Secretary of State Christopher to Benjamin Netanyahu at the Time of Signing of the Hebron Protocol," www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00qo0 (accessed January 20, 2002).
10. Benjamin Netanyahu, "Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the Protocol Concerning Redeployment in Hebron," January 16, 1997, www.israel-mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00t60 (accessed January 20, 2002).