

## Opinion Peace

—Terry Gibbs

After some dramatic posturing and a negotiation process of extremely dubious intent, the Bush administration prepares for war with Iraq. As Rumsfeld, Cheney and gang raced around the globe securing consent for their plans this past fall, the whole process appeared rather circus-like from the home front. Here are some hoops of fire, if you jump through we'll give you a very tasty biscuit, if you don't, we'll beat you with a stick. It reminds one of the 'negotiations' that take place around community participation in structural adjustment policies in poor countries of the South. The not very transparent agenda is—we know we're going to get a lot of flack if we don't at least appear to be having an inclusive discussion but at the end of the day you guys have to agree to this, there's no alternative. Even if you elect that other guy, we're not going away. As the recent elections in Brazil made clear, an invisible but very real factor in the democratic process, 'market confidence', shrinks whenever the basic paradigm is questioned. In the war on terror, anyone who questions the process is at best a naive liberal and at worst a tacit supporter of Osama bin Laden.

We exist at a period in history where democracy as a form of government exists in more countries than ever before. We have an historical opportunity to revisit the values behind our system of government and to reaffirm the substantive agency and accountability that democratic government is supposed to entail. Have we become so cynical and fearful that we accept the 'it's Us vs. Them' thesis, which allows us to stumble alongside the US vision of the war on terror conveniently forgetting what 'We' are supposed to stand for? The choice is not between George Bush and Osama bin Laden's views of the world. There are many other options, options that should take as their starting point a critique of the abuse of power.

If one were to design a plan to build

resentment around the globe, to increase the suspicion and sometimes hatred that many in the Arab world and countries of the South feel for the privileged North, the program would be very simple. Never admit when you've made a mistake, make sure there are no grays (everything is black and white), be clear that there is an objective truth out there and you have it, don't attempt to explore the roots of terrorism and violence, don't try to confront poverty head on, make the world safe for corporations and worry about people later, and complain that your enemies do not respect human

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rights and the UN, but conveniently ignore it when your allies do the same. One does not have to be a left-liberal to realize that this is a very dangerous game, and since 9/11 the consequences are literally right at our doorstep. This is not to deny the great work that many North Americans have done overseas or to say that 9/11 is our fault. It is simply to flag the implications of the US vision of globalization and its approach to the war on terrorism.

After 9/11 many in the academic world decided they needed to know a little more about the Arab world and Islam. Speaker series, conferences and debates on these themes were seen not only as academically interesting but also, for some, necessary to contribute to a more peaceful future. At the time I was teaching in the Political Science Department at Carleton University in Ottawa. We hosted a number of discussions which

revealed an underlying tension about the role of universities in the politics of the day, and of how professors should deal with the issues raised by the violence in New York and Washington. With these issues in mind, I signed up to volunteer in a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut for the summer of 2002.

My sponsor, the Canadian-Palestinian Educational Exchange (CEPAL), provides volunteer opportunities for Canadians to teach English, French and computers in the camps of Lebanon. CEPAL's goal is to assist Palestinian refugees in the pursuit of their basic human rights by increasing their access to education and by raising awareness in Canada of their situation.

Fifty-four years after the first exodus from Palestine, the 350,000 refugees of Lebanon are perhaps the most insecure of the Palestinian refugee communities. Lebanon rejects their permanent settlement and Israel will not allow them to return to their homes. They are prohibited by law from employment in most professions, which effectively leaves a majority unemployed and the rest with manual labour and odd jobs. They are bound by the laws of Lebanon but have no political rights. Refugees in Lebanon have been effectively ignored in the Peace Process, which focuses on the West Bank and Gaza. Meanwhile their communities face economic destitution.

I was based in Bourj al Barajneh refugee camp in the south of Beirut, where almost 20,000 refugees are cramped into one square kilometer of cement apartments stacked vertically and separated by dark narrow passageways. Electricity is often off for a few hours during the day making it unbearably hot indoors without the ceiling fans. We were told not to drink the water even if it had been boiled. Although people can freely spend time outside the camps, most cannot afford to do this. It is extremely difficult for Palestinian families to get their children into universities, and even if they could there would be no jobs for those graduates.

was working mainly with youth and could witness their increasing frustration, and for some, resignation, as they reach the age at which the reality of their situation and their future dawns on them. Many adults in the camps face chronic depression.

I also facilitated activities such as mock elections, conflict resolution workshops and drama skits in the Children and Youth Center (CYC) of Shatila camp. On one occasion, the group reflected on the war on terrorism through a TV talk show skit called “Voices from the Camps.” Sipping a Syrian version of Pepsi, the youth explained their boycott of American products and argued as to whether the American people should be thought of separately from their government. Many said that the American people are not to blame for their government’s uncritical support of the state of Israel and its demonization of the Arab world. Some said that since America is a democracy, the people are at least partly to blame. One of the younger students asked me if all North Americans hate Muslims. Only a few hundred feet from the Children and Youth Center there is a

mass grave guarded by someone who remembers the Israeli-sponsored massacre of 1982. Within the cement walls of Lebanon’s cramped Palestinian camps, one is confronted by the ‘made in America’ trademark of much of the people’s suffering. These youth struggle to visualize their future in a world where they will not be seen as ‘terrorists’.

A group of youth visiting from the US dropped into my class one day and a highly charged discussion took place in which they stated clearly that they have a different vision of American values than their government. Although the atmosphere in the room was one of friendship, the Palestinian youth did not appear to expect much from their American friends. One noted, “those who realize what is going on are in the minority, they have no power, the rest have been brainwashed by the media. We will have to fight this battle on our own.” Looking at me he added, “the Canadians are much less fanatical of course, but no one really listens to you, look at Cuba.” The discussion was enlightening for all involved.

The Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are only a small part of a much larger and more complex problem but one that is at the heart of the West’s relationship to the Middle East. Amnon Rubinstein recently commented in the *Ha’aretz Daily* that it was about time that Human Rights Watch condemned Palestinian violence and suicide bombings as crimes against humanity. He goes on to say that there has been a focus on Israeli violence by human rights groups. Unfortunately this debate is at best unhelpful and at worst polemical and unconstructive. One can criticize violence on both sides and still acknowledge the reality in which most Palestinian people live. They are either living as refugees in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon or in occupied territory in the West Bank and Gaza. Since 1948 they have lived in a state of permanent impermanence. Unlike the people of Israel, they do not have a ‘country’ and a hugely powerful military to protect them. We can criticize Yassir Arafat and his Fatah movement and still have the

ability to bring fresh eyes to the youth growing up in refugee camps and the realities of their day to day existence. It is very dangerous to leave people without hope for too long. Similarly we can criticize Ariel Sharon for his involvement in the crimes against humanity in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps while at the same time acknowledging a younger generation of Israelis who suffer because of the dogmatism of their leaders. While criticizing Saddam Hussein for failing to respect UN resolutions, we cannot ignore Israel’s years of defiant disrespect in this regard.

It is time to move beyond the rhetoric generated on all sides by our political leaders and reinforced by media bias. Universities have a role to play in providing one of the few contexts where serious reflection on these issues can take place. But we must go beyond reflection and contribute to constructive solutions. As Canadians we are one step removed from US policy. This has always been a small space of opportunity for Canadians to contribute to an alternative agenda. Now is the time to talk of building understanding and peace. Ralph Nader has called Canada the conscience of the US. Can we live up to that?

*Terry Gibbs is the Director of the North American Congress on Latin America (www.nacla.org) in New York City. She has worked on social justice issues in Canada for many years. She extends special thanks to the Institute for the Humanities for supporting her volunteer program in Lebanon.*

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