

About This Issue

Four years ago, James Wall wrote an issue for us entitled "On the Jericho Road." It related how, when he was appointed editor of The Christian Century magazine in 1972, he received an invitation from the American Jewish Committee to take an all-expenses paid trip to Israel. He went, but insisted on paying his own way.

On that trip the Reverend Wall, a Methodist minister, met LeRoy Friesen, an American Mennonite serving in Jerusalem. LeRoy asked Jim to spend one day with him on the West Bank. The next day, the two traveled the road leading to Jericho. As Jim wrote in his Sept.-Oct. 2000 Link, the experience changed his way of looking at the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In this post-election, post-Arafat era we now live in, Jim Wall—who is also a movie critic in Chicago—has no illusions about the prospects for resolving the crisis that most observers, including Prime Minister Tony Blair, see as key to Middle East peace. Yet, Jim knows that changing one's mindset is possible, that "conversions" do happen; indeed, they happen all the time.

Several of the books and videos cited in this article are available from our catalog on pp. 14-15, or from our website: www.ameu.org.

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director

WHEN LEGEND BECOMES FACT

BY JAMES M. WALL

IN John Ford's classic 1962 film, "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," a United States senator played by Jimmy Stewart confesses to a local newspaper editor the truth about his political success. The time is the late 19th century in an unnamed state in the Old West. Stewart (Senator Ransom Stoddard) became a hero and achieved national fame after falsely claiming credit for killing a man who was terrorizing his community. Late in life, burdened with the guilt of a lifetime built on deceit, Stoddard gives the press the real story.

The editor tears up the notes his reporter had taken during Stewart's confession, throws them into the flames of a nearby stove, and starts to leave the room. "You mean you are not going to print the story?" Stoddard asks. The editor turns, looks at Stoddard and delivers what has become one of the most famous lines in film history: "This is the West, Sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

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The important thing to remember about Ransom Stoddard is that he knew he was living a lie, embracing a version of history which benefited him but denied everyone else access to the truth. "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" ends on the ironic note that when Stoddard finally chooses to tell the truth, his version of reality is rejected.

Many members of the American media, and more members of our political establishment than the public realizes, are aware that only one narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict receives serious attention in communicating to the American public. There is a cognizant disconnect between what has happened to the Palestinians since 1948 and the way in which those experiences are acknowledged by defenders of the Israeli narrative. The legend—a partial truth—of Israel's take-over of Palestinian land has left the Palestinians with a narrative the west does not wish to hear.

The dominant narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was described almost two decades ago by Jewish historian Simha Flapan:

Even though Israel has the most sophisticated army in the region and possesses an advanced atomic capability, it continues to regard itself in terms of the Holocaust, as the victim of an unconquerable, bloodthirsty enemy. Thus whatever Israelis do, whatever means we employ to guard our gains or to increase them, we justify as last-ditch self-defense. We can, therefore, do no wrong. The myths of Israel forged during the formation of the state have hardened into this impenetrable, and dangerous, ideological shield.¹

After extensive research of the period of Israel's formation as a modern state, Flapan identifies seven "myths" that he refutes as only partial or distorted versions of what has emerged as the prevailing narrative for the region. In light of Yasir Arafat's death, one of those myths is particularly pertinent: **Israel's hand has always been extended in peace, but since no Arab leaders have ever recognized Israel's right to exist, there has never been anyone to talk to.**

On the contrary, Flapan points out, from the end of World War II to 1952, Israel turned down successive proposals made by Arab states and by neutral mediation that might have brought about an accommodation. "No one to talk to" is one of the mantras Israel has used to block dialogue with Palestinians, and most recently, the rhetorical tactic employed to ostracize Arafat in the Ramallah compound where he was buried in mid-November. When a new Palestinian leadership emerges, the makeup of that leadership will again be judged through the Israeli narrative, a single narrative determining whether or not the new Palestinian leader will qualify as someone "to talk to." And, of course, the United States will agree to whatever Israel describes as appropriate Palestinian partners for future peace talks.

Those who know that there is another version of those facts are either unwilling to challenge the single perspective approach to describing and interpreting the conflict because of emotional ties to Israel, or they are afraid to do so for fear of political or economic retribution. Of course, there is a third category: sheer ignorance of alternate perspectives.

The crisis of a Palestinian population that has lived under military occupation since 1967, after having lost a major part of their land in 1948, cries

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out for a new Martin Luther King, Jr., someone to awaken American public opinion to the harsh reality that successive governments have tolerated and provided unyielding support for the repression of an oppressed population whose dreams are not only “deferred,” but on the verge of being obliterated.

Of course, Martin Luther King was not alone when he led the way in the transformation of American public opinion and forced his nation to acknowledge the injustice of racism and racial segregation. He had considerable support in his fight from other African American leaders. Once he literally stumbled into his role as a civil rights revolutionary, Dr. King correctly recognized that he could succeed in reshaping the nation’s attitude toward segregation only with the active support of those he called “people of good will,” a term he employed to suggest his faith in the ability of the American public to demonstrate that good will when apprised of all the facts.

Today, the Israeli version of Middle Eastern reality totally dominates the American mindset in the same manner that white racism dominated the American mindset before the civil rights revolution. Of course, a latent racism still haunts American life, but racist laws no longer control racial relations in the nation. King knew that the first step was to break the bonds of a racist narrative that oppressed African Americans. As he so often said, “The law cannot make you love me, but it can keep you from killing me.”

There are Martin Luther Kings out there waiting to deliver a stern rebuke of reality to an American public that remains largely ignorant of a compelling narrative from the Palestinian perspective. To change American attitudes and policies toward the Palestinians and build a future for Palestinian statehood, a new army of “people of good will” must be found, and expanded, an army that will break the tight grip now held over the American public by the single Israeli narrative.

This requires education, and it requires changes in outlook which, in religious circles, we call “conversion.” We must find ways to accomplish this without denying those portions of the Israeli narrative that recall the horrors of the Holocaust. Fairness and tolerance demand that we honor both narratives, and that means we must refuse to allow those legitimate parts of the Israeli narrative to keep from public view the compelling Palestinian narrative, which includes a history of massacres and decades of personal humiliation and suffering as a people under occupation.

Hope awaits us in stories of conversion to an alternate narrative during this post-2004 election season. That assurance must be shouted from the housetops so that it will

be heard in the alleys of Gaza, the burned-out buildings of Jenin, at the checkpoints where the elderly are humiliated and the young are shot, and in the shadow of that ugly, useless and brutal wall that snakes its way through yet more land stolen from rightful owners. It is time we stopped to hear some of these accounts.

Lifting the Blackout

Since writing my first essay for *The Link* four years ago, I have focused considerable attention on writing and speaking on this topic. During that time I have encountered hostility but I have also discovered many people, Jewish, Muslim and Christian, Americans, Israelis and Palestinians who are actively seeking ways to communicate the Palestinian narrative. I recall one woman who came up to me after I had spoken at a church to say she wanted me to know she had just read the autobiography of Jordan’s Queen Noor, a book she describes as “opening her eyes” to a new way of understanding the Palestinian narrative.

Experiences like this one, and many meetings with members of organizations like the Arab American Action Network (AAAN) and the Jewish organization Not in My Name, both located in Chicago, where I live, have strengthened my conviction that American public opinion will not change until the perception blackout of the Palestinian narrative is lifted.

I am reminded also of what started as a casual request from Maha Jarad, a young Arab American woman in Chicago to two of her friends, Loren Lybarger, and his wife, Mary Aboud, shortly after September 11, 2001. Maha was working with other Arab Americans to confront the sense of unease that swept through her community after 9/11. Maha asked Loren, an American-born University of Chicago graduate student, and Mary, a Lebanese American journalist, if they could help connect the Chicago Arab American community to members of local Christian congregations.

Loren and Mary formed a committee which began meeting in their home on the north side of Chicago, and included activists from Christian churches, Muslims, and some Jewish activists. I was a part of that committee, as was Connie Baker, a young United Methodist woman (and computer specialist) who belongs to the church my wife and I attend. Within a few months, a city-wide day-long program was held in an Oak Park church (a few blocks from Ernest Hemingway’s old residence), drawing several hundred Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Contacts were made, friendships cemented, and information was exchanged between newcomers to the issue and veterans who had spent years working on the issue and visiting in the Middle East. What we discovered was that mainline Christian denominations in the city and suburbs already had their own committees at work on peace and justice in the Middle East, but they were not talking with one another and they had virtually no contact with members of the Muslim community.

We needed a structure, so The Church Network for Education on Palestine (CNEP) was created, formed from representatives of the the various Protestant denominations—including United Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Quaker—to serve as a coordinating committee.

Connie Baker put her computer expertise to work and created a website (www.CNEP.org). She developed a list that connects a growing number of people through program announcements, requests for venues for speakers traveling from the Middle East, educational events, information on meetings in mosques, synagogues, and churches, precisely the sort of multitasking among concerned citizens that we have learned is taking place in other cities around the country.

Since its formation, CNEP members and leaders have traveled to the Middle East and reported back with lectures and Power Point programs, all with the specific intent of bringing the Palestinian perspective to the church community, and building stronger relationships with other faith communities.

This educational effort is still in its infancy; but when I see colleagues of mine at the local mosque celebrating the breaking of the fast (*Iftar*) of Ramadan, and others at the annual Arab Heritage Month reception in Chicago, where the mayor of the city of Chicago, Richard M. Daley, brings greetings to the Arab American community in Chicago, I know we are not in Kansas anymore. What started as a casual request out of a great need has developed into a local network of educational power.

CNEP is now chaired by Connie Baker. She likes to tell the story of her own conversion to seeing the Palestinian perspective. She reports that it started at a dinner party before 9/11 when she remembers my asking her if she had ever thought much about the Palestinian-Israeli issue. I may have just returned from a trip to the area, or maybe I was just making conversation; I frankly do not remember the question.

But she does, and she says that she told me she had not paid much attention to that particular region, though she and her husband have traveled extensively in other

parts of the world. But from that brief conversation, she started reading and studying the media more closely. She sensed a lack of balance and knew she was not getting the full story.

She read other books, and on a regular basis met with our CNEP contacts, Loren, Mary and others from the Arab American community, as well as representatives from the Jewish organization, Not in My Name, and of course, our church denominational leaders, over falafel, pita bread, humus, and Arabic coffee. From small meetings grow larger consequences.

* * *

Lifting the perception blackout is indeed possible but, as President Bush likes to say, "it is hard work." Sometimes, however, it is not hard work but circumstances that lead to the lifting of perception blackout.

Take, for example, the documentary film "Control Room." Directed by Jehane Nojaim, it focuses on the Arab language television satellite network Al Jazeera, and includes one of those moments that only an alert director and interviewer can sense and develop. The subject of the interview is U.S. Marine public information officer Lt. Josh Rushing, who is interviewed in his headquarters in Doha, Qatar, during the early days of the Iraq war.

The interviewer, Abdallah Schleifer, a journalism instructor from American University in Cairo, Egypt, asks Lt. Rushing to look at the Middle East as it is seen by the people who live there. Rushing clearly wants to be helpful. Finally, it dawns on him, and he responds pleasantly, oh, you mean the Arab "perspective." Which is precisely what Schleifer had in mind.

Al Jazeera, with an audience of an estimated 40 million Arabic-speaking viewers, one of three Arab language networks in the region, brings an Arab perspective to its news coverage exactly as U.S. networks bring an American perspective. Unfortunately, U.S. viewers rarely see the Arab perspective. Which makes "Control Room" an especially important film for non-Arabs to see.

Lt. Rushing ended up becoming the star of the documentary. Writing in *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Pat McDonnell Twair describes Rushing as "a dream straight out of central casting: a squeaky clean, idealistic American," and when Rushing "earnestly tells the camera the U.S. is not in the Gulf to occupy or take oil, you know he believes it."

In the course of the film, under questions from Professor Schleifer and Al Jazeera reporter Hassan Ibrahim, Rushing begins to talk about the Arab suffering he has seen in his role as a public information officer. At one

point he admits that he is bothered, as Twair describes it, that “images of Iraqi dead and wounded do not affect him the same way that observing fallen American troops does.” Rushing’s perspective on Arab and American suffering appears to shift as we watch. According to Twair, since the film’s release, Rushing has been promoted to captain but he will retire from the Marines after 14 years in service.

Perhaps anticipating that retirement, at one point in “Control Room” Rushing comments, “If I get out of the Marine Corps and I do anything, I want to do something with the Palestinian issue. I don’t think Americans are getting good information about it. I really don’t,” speaking with a candor U.S. audiences rarely hear from the military or American media.

* * *

There was a brief period when Israel’s aggressive behavior outside the 1967 Green Line borders disturbed even President Reagan, who made noises faintly supportive of the Palestinians. This became more evident after Israel’s 1982 invasion of southern Lebanon which led to the massacres of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila. Some signs of a shift in public opinion softened the media’s hard-line pro-Israel support, and conversions increased. To report on these conversions of Americans to an understanding of the Palestinian perspective, The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs published a series of first-hand accounts, which the magazine compiled in a book called “Seeing the Light.”

Sensitive to the danger of losing support in the U.S., Israel and its U.S. supporters launched an intensive effort of what the Israelis call a *hazbara*, a sustained program to win back the hearts and minds of the American public.

The tactic of *hazbara* has become increasingly successful, up to and including the all out courting of American evangelical Christians who, as Christian Zionists, have provided Israel with a strong political base in the U.S.

But *hazbara* has not prevented other conversions, sometimes in unexpected places. For this article, I interviewed Kathleen Christison, whose experience I found particularly instructive. Christison worked for 16 years as a CIA analyst, and is the daughter of a CIA analyst, and the wife of Bill Christison, also a CIA analyst. Her book, “Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy” (U of California Press, 1999) traces the influence of “perception” on U.S. diplomacy from the 19th century through the present day.

Christison makes the point that academic knowledge and interest in a non-Israeli perspective does not always translate into “feeling” the Palestinian perspective. She

points to one of the better known academics, historian Bernard Lewis, as someone who, according to one former U.S. government official, “had all the appropriate credentials: knowing the Arab world, speaking Arabic better than most Arabs—and being pro-Israeli. It’s an amazing combination.”²

Of course, it is precisely Lewis’s knowledge of Arab history and his Arabic credentials that make him so attractive to pro-Israel politicians and media specialists. Fouad Ajami, himself an Arab, is described by the same official as combining a knowledge of the Arab world with a pro-Israeli tilt. In advising and serving as a consultant or merely as a source through their writings, these two men are able to reinforce U.S. policymakers’ desire and natural instinct to see the conflict through an Israeli prism.

Christison is blunt in her experience with the U.S. foreign policy establishment:

It has been a rare policymaker in the late twentieth century who has not taken office thinking as the general public does on Palestinian-Israeli issues: basically ignorant of the Palestinian situation, and feeling, at least subconsciously, that Palestinians are backward, warlike, perhaps pitiable and, especially, different from Americans, while Israelis are enterprising, progressive, under siege by Arabs and ‘like us’.³

It is a difficult assignment to break through an official perception blindness regarding the Palestinians. But our hope for the future rests on people like Kathleen Christison, whose professional and writing career is a living testimony that it can be done. But what pushes some officials or media members into at least an awareness of the Palestinian perspective, while so many others cling to the standard narrative version?

I asked Ms. Christison if she would be willing to look back at her own “conversion” to a different perspective. Her response offers a case study of why someone like her could move from a conventional pro-Israel position to an awareness of the Palestinian story. Her story is unique but it is also one that is characteristic of so many who go through what they call a personal conversion experience after they “see and hear” a perspective different from the conventional wisdom in which western society is submerged. She agreed to give me an interview.

“My conversion came rather early, and from a surprising source. I grew up with the typical American notion that Israel was a wonderful state and a totally justifiable refuge for persecuted Jews. I always thought of it in my mind’s eye as a place where the sun always shone, in contrast to the Europe of the Holocaust, which I pictured as

just the opposite, a place where the sun never shone.”

Like so many Americans, Christison points to a particularly important and familiar source as critical in shaping her early views, the book and movie, “Exodus.” The book was written by Leon Uris, while the movie was directed by Otto Preminger. Paul Newman starred as the Jewish fighter and Eva Marie Saint portrayed his lover, an American Presbyterian who confesses that she lacks sufficient knowledge of the Bible to refute Newman’s eloquence of Israel’s right to the land wherein rests the Valley of Jezereel.

Christison recalls: “The book came out when I was 17 and the movie a couple of years later. I remember competing with a friend of mine in college to write a review of the movie for the college newspaper. She beat me to it, and I was so enamored of the movie that I was really disappointed.”

Christison's parents were stationed with the CIA in Vietnam in the early 1960s, and she spent a year with them in 1962-63. On her way home, she decided to stop for a week-long visit in Jerusalem to visit Christian holy sites. She remembers not being particularly eager to visit Israel, despite her affection for it, and she confesses that her knowledge of the Palestinians was essentially what she had learned from Leon Uris, not, she now confesses, “a good way to get one’s education.” She was there for the “holy places” and recalls feeling “no fear or disdain for Palestinians.” But the trip did introduce her to Palestinians as “ordinary, decent people, although I still knew nothing about what had happened to them in 1948. I had only a vague knowledge that many Palestinians were refugees, but I really knew nothing about their situation.” [For examples of the myth-information in Leon Uris’s book and the subsequent movie, see page 9. – Ed.]

After college, Christison worked for several years as a CIA political analyst—focusing on Vietnam—from a desk in Washington and in Saigon. In 1971 she transferred to the Arab-Israeli CIA desk. Returning from her final tour in Vietnam in the fall of 1971, knowing she would need to be ready for her new assignment, “I bought a few books from Foyle’s Bookstore in London and finally learned a few things. One book was written by a Palestinian jurist, Henry Cattán, and it made a lasting impression on me because it told the Palestinian side of the story.”

She recalls that her first instinct was to assume Cattán’s version had to be an exaggeration, “a natural reaction because we never seem able to believe it fully when we learn something that totally goes against our own body of assumptions. But I accepted enough of Cattán’s book to finally reach the conclusion that Jews had displaced Palestinians in order to create their state.”

Christison's research had only just started. In Washington, preparing for her new assignment, her desk boss suggested that she read Dan Kurzman's “Genesis 1948: The First Arab-Israeli War.” She remembers Kurzman’s analysis as “a very engaging and, as I remember, a pretty well balanced oral history of the '48 war. This is the book from which I learned, for the first time, that the so-called broadcasts by Arab leaders urging Palestinians to leave so they could ‘push the Jews into the sea’ were a total fabrication.”

More research followed, but the months leading up to her new desk assignment and Kurzman’s book were the turning points in her development. “This is the time, and this is the book, from which I date my early conversion. And the surprising source of my information was the CIA, where it has been my experience that most of the analysts tended to be much more open-minded. Our work demanded it. We had to have a better knowledge than the general population of what was actually going on in our areas.”

In those years, Christison does not recall that any of her colleagues, nor she herself, felt any “real sympathy for either side in the conflict. We all tended to be able to see everyone’s warts and were so busy we didn’t have time to be advocates. Nor were we expected to take sides, and especially were we expected to avoid any form of advocacy.”

When Christison retired from the CIA in 1979 after 16 years, eight of which were with the Middle East, she had developed a solid grounding in the current political situation in Israel and Palestine. Her memory now is that her CIA assignment did not call for her to examine the history of the conflict. But after her retirement Christison worked on history and wrote a book, “The Wound of Dispossession,” that drew from interviews with over 120 Palestinians in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This book focuses on Palestinians who experienced dispossession and exile, conversations with wounded individuals caught up in a conflict that drastically shaped them.

“This experience so vastly enhanced my knowledge of the Palestinian perspective—and, through actual interviewing, taught me so much about the human dimension of the conflict—that I consider this a second conversion, or the second half of a conversion that had begun 20 years earlier.”

* * *

In a survey of people who one would assume would take a conventional pro-Israeli line, but do not, Rachelle Marshall comes immediately to mind. A highly respected free-lance journalist (a regular correspondent for The

Washington Report on Middle East Affairs) who lives in San Francisco, Marshall grew up in a Jewish family that watched with horror as the Holocaust descended on Europe. As she has written about her childhood experiences: "The newsreel I saw in 1938 of bearded Jews on their hands and knees in a Vienna street, surrounded by jeering crowds, was a searing revelation that ordinary men and women could suddenly become savage."

Born in New York City, Rachele is the daughter of a Russian Jewish immigrant father who devoted considerable energy in the 1930s trying to obtain visas for European Jewish family members and friends. An unreceptive U.S. State Department did little to expedite his requests. In 1939, Rachele's father did not see a Zionist state as a solution for world Jewry.

Still, when Israel emerged as a modern state, Rachele assumed that a Jewish state was a good thing. But everything changed for her on June 11, 1967. As she remembers it 37 years later, she went to the curb that morning, picked up the San Francisco Chronicle, and whooped, "We won, we won!" She rushed into the house to tell her family that Israel had defeated the Arab armies in six days, and now would control the West Bank and Gaza. "We won, we won," she repeated.

Her 12-year-old son Jonathan looked up from the breakfast table and refused to share her glee. "Why is Israel any safer than before?" he asked. "Doesn't conquering more territory just mean making more enemies?" Rachele responded with a declaration she immediately regretted: "You haven't been in the Holocaust!"

Jonathan went to school, but when he came home that night, mother and son had a long talk about Israel and the Palestinians.

Jonathan's ideas on the war had been shaped in a social studies class which had held a debate on the coming conflict, several weeks earlier. He had wanted to argue the Jewish side; instead he was given the assignment to defend the Arabs. A diligent student, Jonathan went to the library and studied for the debate. Already steeped in his family's Jewish value system, he emerged with a much deeper understanding of what motivated the Palestinians to want to hold on to their own land and freedom.

Rachele and her husband had met at Antioch College in Ohio, but they deliberately chose a graduate school in the south (North Carolina) where they could also actively fight their generation's cause: ending segregation.

After June 11, and that mother-son talk, Rachele started reading and studying "the situation." Her understanding deepened, in effect preparing her for what lay ahead. In the euphoria of the Six Day War, the U.S. media

celebrated Israel's victory. Rachele knew something was missing: no one was speaking for the occupied Palestinians. She began writing letters of protest to the editors, a practice she continues to this day. Why did she do it?

"I just don't believe in taking other people's land and throwing them off of it. Besides, I take the Jewish prophets seriously. And I believe deeply in Jewish values, which are, after all, not unlike Christian and Muslim values. I know that it is a costly thing for anyone who is Jewish to stand up against the Israeli occupation. I also know that many other Jews feel as I do, more than people realize. They are reluctant to go against the organized Jewish leadership that demands such absolute loyalty to all Israeli actions."

[On Nov. 23, 2004, Rachele joined hundreds of other American Jews in a full-page Open Letter to the U.S. Government in The New York Times calling for, among other things, two equally sovereign states, Israel and Palestine, with partition along the pre-1967 border as modified only by minor mutually agreed territorial swaps, and Israeli evacuation of all settlements in the occupied territories except those within the agreed swapped areas. — Ed.]

Rachele Marshall is anything but reluctant. She sees injustice and fights to correct it.

* * *

Why are some converted and others are not? My assumption is that when injustice is so clearly visible, it takes a considerable amount of personal denial not to see it. Personal and hands-on exposure to suffering on the ground in Palestine remains the most effective way to overcome that personal denial. Consider, for example, the experience of the Rev. Glenn Dickson, a Presbyterian pastor at the Westminster Church in Gainesville, Florida. While on a fact-finding trip to Palestine, Dickson started a process that has led to what the Israeli narrative would term a crisis in interfaith relations between Jews and Christians. But those with an awareness of the Palestinian narrative describe the results of Dickson's action as a breakthrough in church action for justice.

The story begins in Palestine while Dickson and a group of fellow Florida Presbyterians were traveling with a Christian Peacemakers Team (CPT) in Palestine and Israel. As Dickson recalls the trip, a discussion arose around the question, what can we do to confront the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.

The tactic of divestment was considered. Gradually, this small group of Presbyterians moved toward a decision to write an "overture," an official document from a local church, which would be submitted to the Jacksonville, Florida Presbytery for approval. The overture was

endorsed by the Presbytery and sent to the national General Assembly.

The overture was considered along with three resolutions that had made their way up the chain of command. Those resolutions, which originated in the Chicago Presbytery, called for an end to the construction of the wall of separation, opposition to Christian Zionism, and the withdrawal of funding for support of Messianic Jewish congregations, an evangelistic strategy greatly resented by American Jews.

The Florida overture and the Chicago resolutions all passed, but it was divestment that drew an immediate and heated response, especially from American Jewish organizations. In Chicago, which has long had a strong organization that encourages Jewish-Christian dialogue, meetings were requested by local Jewish leaders with Presbyterian leaders to discuss the impact of the divestment policy.

The meetings were contentious, two narratives clashing not in the dark, but in board rooms of churches and Jewish organizations. The Jewish leaders turned to their interfaith Christian colleagues, who responded by pointing out to the Presbyterians that the divestment issue was undermining Jewish-Christian dialogue. These leaders protested that Jewish leaders had not been consulted prior to the drafting of the overture.

The Presbyterians made the case that they were well informed as to the damage the occupation and the wall brings to the Palestinian population. It is clear that divestment is a sensitive point of attack because it recalls a similar tactic employed in the overthrow of the apartheid policies of South African white leaders.

In spite of these protests from Jewish leaders and their Christian interfaith colleagues, the Presbyterian process moved forward until early November, 2004, when The Presbyterian Church committee on socially responsible investment established six criteria to guide the process of "phased selective divestment" from corporations that profit from Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza unless their business practices change.

Major denominations like the Presbyterian Church, United States of America (PCUSA) have large portfolios in their pension and mission investments, estimated in the PCUSA to be upwards of \$8 billion. The church requires that the policy covering investments move cautiously, which in this instance means that targeted corporations could experience the loss of invested funds by June 2006.

Four of the six criteria adopted by the church committee focus on the Israeli occupation, including the construction of Jewish settlements. A fifth criterion focuses on companies that provide material that "enables violence"

by either Palestinians or Israelis. The final criterion targets companies that supply material and labor for the wall.

According to a press release from the PCUSA, "at least nine Jewish groups are working to preempt Israel divestment decisions by other churches." Jewish groups have also launched a campaign to pressure the next national General Assembly of the PCUSA (in 2006) to rescind the action of the 2004 Assembly.

Divestment by other denominational groups aimed at corporations that support the wall and settlements are also moving forward. The 80 million-member worldwide Anglican church (the Episcopal church in the U.S.) has put divestment recommendations on the agenda for its next meeting.

All the credit, or blame, depending on which narrative dominates one's thinking, does not go to the Rev. Glenn Dickson, of Gainesville, Florida, but it was his initial "overture" that started the Presbyterian divestment process.

Former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan got it right when he reportedly said that he would rather see a Palestinian in the cockpit of an Israeli F14 jet than in the guide seat of an Israeli tour bus. Indeed, an Israeli tour guide is more effective in serving Israel's cause than a fighter pilot, which is why Israel has tried to maintain such tight control over visitors entering Palestine. Those Florida Presbyterians on that Christian Peacemaker Team trip found a way to grasp a narrative and take action for justice.

The good news is that they are not alone, which is why the future is much brighter than it now appears.

The New Exodus

The task of demythologizing the legend still remains daunting. We need only to look at the recent presidential and congressional elections to see the dominance of the pro-Israel perspective in our public life. Examples are found even in forward looking newspapers like the Chicago Tribune, which gives wide coverage to Palestinian stories, but which recently ran an editorial describing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to remove settlements from Gaza as "a courageous act."

I would like to think that someone on the editorial staff made the point to the writer of that editorial that ob-

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“Exodus”: When the Legend Became Fact

Myth: Ari Ben Canaan, born in Palestine, explains to Kitty, the American Presbyterian: “3200 years ago is when we Jews came here. I am a Jew, and this is my country.”

Fact: Historically, Jews were not the first inhabitants of Palestine, nor did they rule there for as long as a number of other peoples did. Modern archaeologists now generally agree that Egyptians and Canaanites inhabited Palestine from the earliest recorded days of around 3000 B.C. to around 1700 B.C. There followed other occupiers such as Hyksos, Hittites, and Philistines. The Hebrew period of rule started only in 1020 B.C. and lasted until 587 B.C. The Israelites were then overrun by Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Egyptians, and Syrians until the Hebrew Maccabeans regained partial rule in 164 B.C. However, in 63 B.C. the Roman Empire conquered Jerusalem and in 70 A.D. destroyed the Second Temple and scattered the Jews into other lands. In sum, ancient Jews controlled Palestine or some major parts of it for less than six hundred years in the five-thousand-year period of Palestine’s recorded history—less than Canaanites, Egyptians, Muslims, or Romans. The U.S. King-Crane Commission concluded in 1919 that a claim “based on an occupation of two thousand years ago can hardly be seriously considered.”

Source: “Deliberate Deceptions,” by Paul Findley, pp. 3-4.

* * *

Myth: Akiva Ben Canaan, Ari’s uncle and a leader in the Irgun, an outlawed Jewish terrorist organization, justifies his terrorism noting that every nation is born of violence. When he blows up the King David Hotel at noontime, killing 91 British, Arabs and Jews, he says that three warnings had gone unheeded, concluding if “they want their own people killed, we’ll oblige them.” Ari’s father, a member of the Haganah, the illegal Jewish army estimated at 60,000 troops, is portrayed as fiercely opposing such terrorist tactics in favor of diplomacy.

Fact: The historical figure on whom Akiva is based, Menachem Begin, then head of the Irgun, writes in his book documenting his terrorist acts that far from opposing the bombing of the King David Hotel, the Haganah ordered and helped to coordinate it. Nor is there any evidence that warnings had been given prior to the attack. Begin bragged in his book that he was “Terrorist Number One;” he would later go on to become prime minister of Israel.

Source: “The Revolt,” by Menachem Begin, p. 216.

* * *

Myth: Barak Ben Canaan, Ari’s father, in his role as a Haganah representative, makes an appeal to the Arab population following the U.N. partition vote: “We implore you to remain in your homes and your shops, and we shall work together as equals in the free state of Israel.”

Fact: The expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians was the result of a deliberate plan, code named Plan Dalet, to clear out the Arab population from areas allotted by the U.N. to the Jewish state and even from parts allotted to the Palestinian state. According to a report dated June 30, 1948, written by the Israel Defense Forces Intelligence Branch for the Israeli Prime Minister, hostile Haganah operations were, “without a doubt,” the main cause of the movement of population. The report concludes that “it is possible to say that at least 55 percent of the total of the exodus was caused by our [Haganah] operations and by their influence.”

Source: “Facts & Fables,” by Clifford A Wright, pp. 16-17.

* * *

Myth: A Gestapo-like German, representing the grand mufti of Jerusalem, tells Ari’s Palestinian friend and neighbor, Taha, that his village must contribute fighters to his Arab storm-troopers whose goal it is to rid Palestine of all Jews.

Fact: The image of the mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, leading hordes of Palestinians into battle against a small Jewish community intent on defending the U.N. Partition Resolution has all the elements of simplistic Manichaeism: the forces of darkness pitched against the (naturally outnumbered) forces of light. It is true that the Arabs of Palestine were opposed to the U.N. Partition Resolution because it gave the Jews, who constituted 35 percent of the population—and owned 6 percent of the land—55 percent of the country’s territory. However, when the mufti called for volunteers for his Army of Sacred Struggle to oppose partition, the majority of the Palestinian Arabs declined to respond. In fact, prior to Israel’s unilateral Declaration of Independence, many Palestinian leaders and groups wanted nothing to do with the mufti or his political party and made various efforts to reach a modus vivendi with the Zionists. It was David Ben-Gurion’s profound resistance to the creation of a Palestinian state that significantly undermined any opposition to the mufti’s policies.

Source: “The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities,” by Simha Flapan, pp. 57-58.

(Continued from page 8)

servers of the Gaza developments who view the issue from outside the dominance of the Israeli narrative are well aware that the settlements are to be removed from Gaza solely for the benefit of Israel.

Sharon's action is anything but "courageous." It is designed to release Israel from the onerous task of having its army guard a small number of Jewish settlers in the midst of a hostile population. More importantly, it will allow Israel to strengthen its hold on its permanent settlements in the West Bank. Letters to the newspaper have made that point vigorously, another indication that letter writers are out there, that they are agitated, and that the Tribune is open to sharing their agitation with its readers.

President George Bush's total embrace of the Israeli narrative, which he has endorsed with even greater fervor since the horrors of September 11 jolted him into a "war on terror," is well known. It became even more evident in the months prior to his reelection when he stripped away all diplomatic pretenses of neutrality and gave full support to the Sharon plan to make Israeli settlements in the West Bank no longer negotiable but permanently a part of Israel. The Sharon government thus has the right "to defend itself" in the West Bank, even when considerable world opinion continues to affirm that Israel's insistence on holding onto the West Bank is not defense but aggressive land grabbing.

Exit polls on November 2 indicate that Arab Americans and Muslims shifted their allegiance toward the Democratic ticket, a major change since 2000, when President Bush got the majority of that voting community. This was no doubt related to the realization that the Patriot Act, which targeted their community in harsh and humiliating ways, was more likely to be enforced with even greater zeal under President Bush than might have been the case with a Kerry administration.

That vote shift toward the Democrats, however, could not have come from any sense that the Palestinian narrative would receive more favorable attention from John Kerry or his running mate, Senator John Edwards. Friendship with Israel and devotion to whatever policies Israeli Prime Minister Sharon wants to pursue was a given for both political parties, each of which eagerly sought votes and money from supporters of Israel.

Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant church officials have consistently called for U.S. politicians to halt what has been termed a "hug of death" between the dominant Israeli government and the Palestinians. These pleas were ignored, thanks in large measure to the degree to which the Israeli narrative dominates American public

opinion. Politicians and a compliant media have not only endorsed Israel's military solution to its Palestinian "problem" and a continuation of occupation of Palestinian land, they have simply refused to look at the suffering this occupation causes the Palestinians.

Church delegations that speak with members of Congress, or their aides, report a consistent vacant stare when the suggestion is made that the Palestinian narrative is unheard in the halls of Congress. These may be stares of indifference or boredom, but some could be stares that cover a feeling of helplessness and guilt, something akin to the guilt Senator Ransom Stoddard carried for maintaining the fiction that he shot Liberty Valance.

Such is the power of the grip the Israeli narrative has on the American mindset. The contours of this landscape are so blatantly distorted, the suffering and injustice of the treatment of Palestinians, and by extension, of the Arab world, so clearly wrong that anyone who has ever been exposed to the Palestinian narrative can only grieve at the damage inflicted by this suppression of an alternate narrative.

What the American government has done in Iraq will haunt us for generations. An illegal preemptive military assault followed by the agony of yet another occupation of a Middle Eastern people by a western power places this nation in the tradition of earlier empire-building nations that relied on deceit and racist attitudes to make a case for controlling other people. The Iraq invasion was most certainly related to the belief, sponsored vigorously by President Bush's neo-conservative advisors, that as our major ally in the region, Israel will benefit from an American-dominated Iraq.

This perception has historic precedents. Our ventures in the Middle East follow the same path as that taken by previous invaders, notably and most recently the British. This practice pretends to bring democracy when, in fact, empire building is the major rationale for invasion. A loyal and subservient "colonial" leadership in Iraq will both protect Israel and presumably guarantee easy access to, and control of, Iraq's vast oil holdings.

Empire building by modern democracies does not enjoy the lusty freedom of dictators. To corral democracy into violating the freedom of others requires deceit so that the civilian population will accept the cost of doing what instinctively they feel is wrong. An empire expands to benefit itself, but it sells its ventures in altruistic terms, claiming to benefit those that it would conquer. Otherwise, its behavior shames its own citizens. A convenient narrative must be shaped to persuade citizens in a democracy that its government reluctantly employs military force against other nations, but only for righteous and just

causes.

Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi, in his latest book "Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East," cites a news report from the London Sunday Times of August 22, 1920, written by T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia):

"The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honor. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqés are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told. . ."

Prevailing narratives allow empire builders to repeat both their mistakes and suffer consequences which a careful reading of history, unfiltered through a false narrative, might have helped them avoid.

In reports from Palestine an American public must be kept focused on the suffering of our friend and ally, Israel, with only a minimal amount of information allowed to filter through our media screens of Palestinian suffering. Now that President Bush has, in his words, "earned the capital" to fight his "war on terror," we have no reason to expect that he will make any further effort to block Prime Minister Sharon's quest for total control of the occupied land of the West Bank and Gaza, forcing the local population into bantustans surrounded by an occupying army that has moved to border control duties.

In a post-Arafat era, if we follow previous strategies, the Israeli narrative that dominates American thinking will insist on a "new" Palestinian leadership acceptable to Israel. The rich, cultural and political history of the Palestinian people will draw little attention in our media. The White House and the Congress will make Israel's case, and with the support of a compliant national media and a political base dominated by evangelical Christian and other pro-Israel supporters, they are likely to be successful. Selling the future of the Palestinian people in terms of what is good for Israel, with little thought for the benefit of the Palestinians, will require but a few nods to Palestinians to sell the package to the American public. I speak on college campuses and in

churches on this topic and one question seems to appear with increasing frequency: Does Israel have a right to exist? That is, of course, an entitlement question that is at the heart of our legal system. People have rights; do nations have rights as well? I stay away from any response that draws me into a conversation, say, about my neighbor's right to have a barking dog, or the right to throw garbage into my backyard.

The answer I have tried to hone is to respond with another question: Does the United States have the right to



James Wall, left, with Palestinian priest Fr. Elias Chacour.—Courtesy J. Wall

occupy and possess Kansas and Oklahoma? The answer is that "right" is no longer the issue in the case of Kansas, Oklahoma, or the state of modern Israel. They exist and no one may question that "existence." But Oklahoma does not have the "right" to occupy Kansas. Nor does Israel have the right to occupy land outside of its 1967 borders.

When Israel was created as a modern state in 1948, it was built on land governed by a British mandate, a part of the old Ottoman Empire called Palestine. Contrary to the famous statement by the early Zionist, Israel Zangwill,

Palestine was not “a land without a people for a people without a land,” there was a large population that was driven out before the state of Israel could settle into the area as an exclusive Jewish state.

The U.S. State Department opposed the creation of the new Jewish state. Many American Jews, fearing that Zionism would create more anti-semitism and undercut the Jewish faith, also opposed its creation. American missionaries living and working in the region strongly opposed the new state. These opposition groups felt for a variety of reasons that a “one-state solution” would be best, that is, a single state of Palestine guaranteeing civil rights and equal treatment for all of its citizens, Jewish and Palestinian.

But history is never that simple. In 1947, World War II and the Holocaust had just ended. The U.S. Jewish community strongly supported the Jews of Palestine in demanding that a Jewish state be created on the land of their ancestors, even if it meant depriving almost one million Palestinians of their “right” to exist as free citizens. President Harry S Truman overruled his state department and ignored American church leaders when he endorsed the new state with this pragmatic observation:

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to Zionism; I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents.”

American support was essential for the creation of the state and it has remained essential for Israel’s continued growth as a modern nation. Displaced Palestinians have been woefully inadequate in countering this developing reality. One reason, writes Rashid Khalidi, is that, “The Palestinians were largely ignorant from the 1940s until the present day of how American politics worked, and of the political ineffectiveness of a largely first generation Arab American community that initially was not very focused on the question of Palestine.”⁴

The Palestinians also did not have a movie industry lined up to make their case for a shared state on their land. The Jewish people did. And without a doubt the one film that had the greatest impact on creating support for Israel’s cause was the epic movie “Exodus”—as Kathleen Christison has attested. (See partial list of some of the more blatant historical errors on page 9.)

Speakers in support of Palestinian justice must also confront the fiction that the U.S. is an “honest broker” in the Middle East conflict. Former President Bill Clinton, seeking to rescue a tarnished presidency and aware that his wife was looking toward a political career in New York, pushed Yasir Arafat to accept a “generous offer” at Camp David in 2000, an offer that was neither generous,

and not even an offer, though that version remains a prevailing myth from the meetings. The “offer” was, in fact, a demand, take it or else. And we now see what the “or else” has come to, a steady movement, sanctioned by the Bush White House and the Congress leading to complete Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza.

In the Israeli narrative of what happened when no agreement was reached during the final months of Bill Clinton’s administration, the offer the Israeli narrative described as “generous” was rejected by Arafat at the end of negotiations in 2000 at Taba, Egypt. The blame for the failure of the talks and the start of the second intifada thus fell entirely on Arafat, thanks to Clinton, Barak, and the media that accepted the myth and made it conventional wisdom.

As London Guardian reporter Derek Brown points out, this version is “complete nonsense.” Brown reports that Israel saw the original agreement reached at Oslo—and celebrated on the White House lawn in 1993—as anything but a compromise. For them it was a victory. “And as victors, they demanded more and more spoils: permanent sovereignty over Arafat’s beloved Jerusalem; a permanent settler presence in the West Bank; a permanent security cordon along the Jordan, and complete control of airspace and coastline. There was to be no question of any right of return for the Palestinian diaspora, nor any compensation for up to six million refugees and their descendants.”

Dennis Ross, special envoy to the Middle East for both the elder George Bush and Bill Clinton, has written his own self-serving version of the Clinton-Arafat-Barak talks, “The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace.” It is a version that is at variance from the understanding of others who were there. Ross promotes the “generous offer” myth in his book.

Michael C. Desch, Professor in Intelligence and National Security Decision-making at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, wrote in a review of Ross’s book for the American Conservative that Ross’s “faulty assessment results from a set of biases shared among many Americans but exacerbated in Ross’s case by his personal and religious ties to Israel and by his all-too-human need to find someone to blame.” Desch’s refutation of Ross is important:

First and perhaps most important, it is not correct to say that Israel accepted the Clinton parameters while the Palestinians rejected them. The Israeli cabinet voted to accept Clinton’s ideas (which were not a final agreement but rather a set of guidelines within which a final

settlement would be reached), but Prime Minister Ehud Barak then sent Clinton a 20-page letter outlining Israel's objections. Similarly, the Palestinian leadership also sent Clinton a detailed letter thanking him for his efforts and relating their own reservations. Both sides made clear that they wanted to continue to negotiate within that framework, but both also registered concerns. The claim that Israel accepted these terms while Arafat rejected them is a myth.⁵

The first column I wrote after 9/11 for my magazine, *The Christian Century*, appeared September 26-October 3, 2001, but it was written a few days after the attacks—so soon that I was still using the initial 5,000 deaths figure which was first reported, and which was soon reduced to around 3,000. Because that column addresses the issue of crime versus war, I will quote from it:

Massive crimes have been committed against our people and our nation. Some of those responsible for these crimes died in the plane crashes. Others remain behind, and justice demands we hold them accountable. But justice is not retaliation. We retaliate only because we want to lash out to satisfy our hunger for revenge. Massive revenge is not only self-destructive, it is precisely how our attackers expect us to respond.

I then quoted Oxford Professor Michael Howard, who wrote in the *London Times* that in his study of the history of terrorism, he found that one of the goals of terrorist activity is to provoke an enemy into such "savagely acts of suppression" that the terrorist will gain international sympathy for his cause.

Professor Howard was right on one count: we did respond with savage acts in the form of a "shock and awe" military invasion of Iraq. But he misread world opinion. Since the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the world has not gained in sympathy for terror, but neither has it embraced the revenge exercised by the nation that was the target of 9/11.

Alluding to an earlier reference to words from the New Testament, I ended the column with these suggestions: "This is not a time for vengeance. It is a time for justice, and for reordering how we view the world. Let those who have ears to hear, hear, and those who have eyes to see, see. Only by embracing those 'who are weak and who have rights' will we be rescued from our warring madness."

The new exodus we embark upon today is an exodus from media bondage. The leaders of this exodus are those

people of good will who speak truth to power: people like computer specialist Connie Baker, Marine Lt. Josh Rushing, CIA analyst Kathleen Christison, free-lance writer Rachele Marshall, the Rev. Glenn Dickson—and indeed, every one of us who writes a letter to an editor, or passes on an informed article to a friend.

End Notes

¹Flapan, Simha, "The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities," p. 8.

²Christison, Kathleen, "Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy," p. 11.

³Christison, Kathleen, "Perceptions of Palestine," p. 12.

⁴Khalidi, Rashid, "Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East," p. 122.

⁵Desch, Michael, "The Peace That Failed" in: *The American Conservative*, Nov. 8, 2004.

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Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) is looking for partners to formalize the connections it has with many church-related groups and their members, many of who look to CMEP as a primary source for sensible, time-tested instruction and guidance on U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

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**In the printed issue of this *Link*,
Page 14 lists books that are
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- Masri, M., **Hanan Ashrawi: A Woman of Her Time** (1995, VHS, 51 minutes). Palestine's articulate representative shows that Israel's occupation is far from benign. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- Moushabeck, M., **Anatolia: The Lost Songs of Palestine** (2001, CD, 52 minutes). **AMEU: \$12.50.**
- Munayyer, F. & H., **Palestinian Costumes and Embroidery: A Precious Legacy** (1990, VHS, 38 minutes). A rare collection of Palestinian dresses presented with historical background and commentary. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
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