

Snippets of Controversy

General Intro: *I have no unshakable conviction that I will be on the right side of history. Still, a half century of witnessing events in the Middle East and reactions to them in the west, has not fundamentally altered my lens of interpretation. I would like to believe that my political views are more nuanced in these advanced years.*

In any case, the following reflections were spurred by news events of the past. More recent events might have better informed these opinions—but I have yet to find evidence to disavow them.

Slick Willy in sackcloth:



It was revealing to watch the CNN coverage of Bill Clinton's speech to the Israeli Youth Congress in Jerusalem.

"The US commitment to your security is ironclad," he said, jaw thrust out resolutely. "As you take risks for peace, the US will be with you—every step of the way."

His eyes seemed to dart from teleprompter and audience to a facing TV monitor... Through the day, every news-channel was displaying banner updates of his impeachment enquiry. After ploughing into dead ends in the Whitewater investigations, Special Counsel Ken Starr had hit pay dirt on allegations of Clinton's sexual misconduct with a congressional intern called Monica Lewinsky.

It was long known that Slick Willy had numerous "bimbo eruptions". Up to the present, a Kennedyesque libido has been only a minor political liability—however humiliating to wife, Hillary.

Yet in this revelation, the power imbalance between the USA's chief executive and a 24-year-old intern could not have been more extreme. Perhaps the dalliances might not have been quite as shocking were it not for the sordid details that emerged. In lavishing his report with such details as oval office fellatio and vaginal insertions of cigars—it seemed that Starr, self-described evangelical Christian, was titillated as much as scandalized.

Unspoken in that sordidness were shocking reminders of pretty girls in concentration camps spared the gas chamber only to serve as sex slaves for sadistic Nazi officers... Dark imaginings aside, the bottom line that Clinton crossed was plain: a Jewish girl from a middle-class American family was *never* to be treated like Arkansas trailer trash...

Will Willy wiggle out of this scandal? No matter that Starr is a sanctimonious slimeball while Bill's tormentor in chief—Republican house leader Newt Gingrich—left a dying wife to dally with his mistress. As the climax of the impeachment drama unfolds, there is no doubt that Bill will desperately attempt to burnish his now besmirched Israel credentials. Recalling his vigorous attacks on his former adversary George H. W. Bush for allegedly tepid support of the Jewish state, Bill is keenly aware where his bread is buttered. Thus, in sackcloth he appears in Jerusalem...

It was amusing to watch the president trying not to squirm before his skeptical audience. Meanwhile at his side, Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu twiddled his thumbs in bemusement.

1998, Dec. 12

fwf

Seizing the historical moment:



“NOW, we get it.”

Today’s news of the Israeli missile attack on Gaza (fourteen Palestinians killed— including nine children) harkened to that comment of CNN commentator, Jeff Greenfield, in the aftermath of the 911 attacks...

Implicit in his words was that there was no longer a shred of justification for questioning Israel’s methods... Finally, it was plain that Israel and the US had a common enemy. With the jihadist terror attack on the US homeland, not only Jewish American journalists “got it” that a indestructible US-Israel alliance had been forged in fire... Indeed, before the toxic dust settled over Manhattan— American support for Israel had rocketed to an all-time high.

Ariel Sharon’s expressions of grief over the attack on American were no doubt genuine. But he too— “got it”. The 911 attack ended all pretense of creating a Palestinian state on the occupied territories. Israel would henceforward have a green light and a free hand in dealing with its security problems.

Of course, even in wreaking vengeance on the Taliban in Afghanistan, America would have to feign some sensitivity to its Muslim allies. So, Bush’s statement chiding Israel to be a little more careful with collateral damage in Gaza, was crafted for that purpose. Yet his statement was issued with an off-screen wink to Ariel Sharon...

Meanwhile, over on Fox News, a commentator pointed to a map of Israel and spoke of the vulnerability of its slender territory. “It’s as tiny country,” he said, “just like the America with only thirteen little colonies was at the time of our birth.”

The analogy was that little Israel was as fragile as America had been in its infancy... But as manifest destiny would have it— the tiny strip of territory hemmed-in along North America’s east coast would burst forth to encompass half the continent from sea to shining sea...

Similarly, it was implied that Israel could be on the verge of fulfilling its headiest Zionist dream. With the enduring support of the colossus that strides the globe, the Jewish State could seize the historical moment and wed ‘Judea and Samaria’ permanently to the Jewish state... An Eretz Israel, from river to sea, would certainly be supported by a majority of Christian Americans weaned on ‘*The Ten Commandments*’.

2002 July

Evangelists in rapture:



Back in early afternoon from picking strawberries in Aldergrove with the kids, I had about an hour to kill before driving MH to his baseball game. While he played Runescape at the desktop in the corner, I turned on the TV. Flipping through the mid-afternoon bleakness, I stopped perversely on the 'Miracle' channel.

The spectacle of two grey-pompadoured evangelicals in business suits in animated chatter was curious in itself. But what really caught my attention was the banner behind them. It read: '*Adopt an Israeli Settler*'.

For several moments, I watch, agape. The pair inveigled viewers to donate to an organization called '*Christian Friends of Israeli Communities*'. Photos were flashed up of projects which the registered charity funded: schools, playgrounds, farms and even security operations—all in Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

"As Christians we have this special opportunity to help Israel reclaim the lands of Judea and Samaria", grinned one of the Christian Elvises.

"It's in biblical prophecy!" The other eagerly nodded.

Other photos showed Christian volunteers on tours to the settlements, even volunteering in the farms. An address in Colorado Springs was flashed which would send donors further information about settlement tours and volunteering opportunities. The photos of American evangelicals posing in an agrobusiness vineyard were a far cry from images of backpackers in 1960s' kibitzes...

"Can you imagine harvesting grapes in Judea?" said one. He the quoted a biblical passage: "*When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward...*"

"Deuteronomy!" said the other with a little hop. "That just gives me warm shivers!"

For several minutes they burbled and giggled—in raptures over their biblical imaginings.

How would donors react, I wondered, in seeing photos of settlers terrorizing Arab villagers, burning cars, uprooting their olive trees and poisoning their crops? Would they accept that as fulfillment of scripture?

The likelihood was that a majority of evangelicals—certainly in America— are cheered by reports of God's Chosen smiting the Arab philistines... After all, just a generation ago, the same

cracker Christians believed in God's plan to keep 'negroes' in their place—even when bullwhips, fire hoses and attack dogs were used as divine instruments.

Spontaneously, a curse broke from my throat. "Evil, fucking bastards," I seethed. "They're the scum of the earth!"

My 11-year-old half turned from the keyboard, momentarily interrupted from casting spells on the monsters of Runescape...

-2003, June

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Resisting ‘issue fatigue’:



While labouring up the steep Coquitlam Crunch trail above the Panorama playing field, I thought about ‘issue fatigue’. That was the topic of a segment of the CBC radio interview heard on driving MH to his baseball practice.

The general idea, outlined by the American professor interviewed by the Sunday Morning show host, was that media paid too much attention to some issues and too little to others. The information overload on certain controversial issues tends to result in boredom and disengagement. For a few others, oversaturation on an issue intensifies a sense of frustration and helplessness...

The professor opined that it is naïve to assume one can have informed opinions on everything. He advised that one ought to focus on just a few issues. Outside of that narrow focus, one should be willing to defer to “experts who have time and effort for complex understandings.”

None of this blather would have blipped my radar were it not for the example which he gave of a “complex issue better left to experts”: That was the hot-button issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict...

He said that since experts themselves admitted to “exhaustion” over the issue— how could a layman possibly understand it? The expert he referenced was Martin Indyk, the American negotiator at the failed Camp David summit. I remembered him as the one whom the Palestinians later blamed for subverting the talks...

I had to agree that ‘exhaustion’ and ‘fatigue’ did come to mind in regard to hopes for a just settlement in Israel/Palestine. There is exhaustion with the empty talk of a Palestinian state while the daily humiliation of Palestinians intensifies and the Israeli settlements on the West Bank expand. In the cycle of violence and reprisal— there is exhaustion in the disproportionate pain inflicted by the occupier upon the occupied...

Meanwhile, the saturation continues. Just yesterday there was reports of resistance to Ariel Sharon’s Gaza withdrawal plan from both the PLO and from the Israeli parliament. The ultra-nationalist Israelis are loath to give up their Gaza settlements. The Palestinians are suspicious that the dismantling of a few settlements is a unilateral attempt to ‘swap’ a few Gaza kibbutzim for permanent West bank settlements with hundreds of thousands of Israeli residents. Meanwhile, Gaza will remain a tiny and impoverished enclave—fenced in and permanently cut off from the West Bank...

Yet even in the relentlessly grim reports—does any single issue in current world affairs deserve more attention? So, in spite of the ‘exhaustion’ and despair, I cannot turn away. At the same time, I never fail to be aware of the risks of a pro-Palestinian stance—especially given the prevailing belief that ‘brave little Israel’ is at the forefront of the war on terror...



While the risks are not quite of the magnitude of having been a card-carrying communist in the 1950s, I certainly keep mum about my views on the Middle East around the office photocopier...

Among my colleagues are a few older progressives with apparent sympathies for a bygone Israel of Holocaust survivors and socialist pioneers.

Most notable is WB, the veteran social studies teacher who is also a local historian of some repute. One evening soon after the 911 attacks, he offered his theory on the cause of Islamic terrorist attacks:

“The problem, really, stems from that fact that Islam did go through a reformation as Christianity did in the late Middle Ages. You know, beginning Martin Luther’s protest against corruption in the Catholic Church. Islam had never had a Martin Luther. So nearly five hundred years later, we are dealing with jihadist terror.”

I was itching to devil’s advocate that the causes of suicide bombings in Israel did not quite so neatly fit into his theory—but thought the better of it...

Heedless of issue fatigue, I persist in engaging a “complex understanding” that can only elude my little noggin...

2004, May

Fifteen minutes of History #101:



In preparing to write a grade twelve history essay on antisemitism, 17-year-old TE asked for a little help:

Have you heard about Jim Keegstra?" she asked, glancing back at the assignment paper in her clipboard.

Only vaguely, I remembered the case of the Alberta high school teacher who was convicted in the early 1990s for promoting hate speech in his classroom.

"So, what do you know about him?" I asked, motioning for her to sit on the other side of the sofa. She glanced over at her elder sister, MT, at the computer desk in the opposite corner of the room.

"Well, he said bad things to his students about Jewish people." She fiddled her pen. "He also told his students that the Holocaust didn't happen."

"Of course that's nonsense," I said. "But in his defence, I think he said he was exercising his constitutional right to free speech. He took that to the Supreme Court but lost. Right?"

"Yeah, we learned about that. But what about the history of antisemitism? Where did it begin?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, you could write a book about that. How long is your essay?"

"How long is two thousand words?"

"Around four pages." I settled back. "Well, I guess you could say it goes back to Europe in the Middle Ages."

For the quarter hour that followed, I indulged in a mini lecture, occasionally pausing while my daughter scratched down a few words.

The information was standard History #101: I started by emphasising the superstitious ignorance of medieval Christians. I referred to the "irrational fear of 'the 'other'" that led to persecutions of non-Christians. I mentioned the Spanish inquisition and Eastern European pogroms.

I also spoke of the growing prosperity of urban Jews that led to jealousy and suspicion:

“The early Christians thought that money handing was unclean,” I said, “So those who were relegated to ‘dirty’ jobs—like banking—got rich. Their kids got educated.”

Shifting to the modern era, I gave examples of fields where Jewish people have excelled and prospered in the fields of science, medicine, law, journalism and the entertainment industry.

“So, by their success in most western countries, some Jewish people have become powerful—especially in America. And like all rich and powerful people, they have exercised their influence over issues that matter to them. A lot of that influence had been for the good.”

With that, I referred to “the long tradition” of Jewish support of social justice issues and civil rights.

I then paused. “Did you learn in your history class about the founding of Israel after World War Two?”

She nodded.

“Well,” I said, “most Jewish people strongly supported the creation of Israel—even the majority who did not choose to move there. Many Jews still do support Israel. But many realize that Israel needs to do more to make peace with the Palestinians. The Israeli settlers pushed most Palestinians out of their traditional homeland in 1948 when they created Israel. They occupied even more Palestinian territory after a war with their Arab neighbours in 1967.”

TE slightly frowned. I realized I was getting windy—and was drifting off topic. Still, I had to get in a critical point. Since she had many times heard me mutter and curse at TV and radio reports—she had to be assured that her father was definitely *not* an antisemite.

“Anyway, most people who criticize Israel for not being fairer with the Palestinians are not antisemitic. It is not unjust to disagree that Jews from all over the world have a right to move to Israel whereas Palestinians who were kicked out, do not. That is being antizionist. That is entirely different than being someone who hates Jewish people just for being Jewish. *That* is antisemitism.”

I stopped as she scribbled a few more lines.

“So, it’s not much different than racism. Keegstra was definitely an antisemite. He probably even admires Hitler. He probably hates black people and non-European immigrants as much as he hates Jews. He is a dangerous person who deserves to be in jail.”

TE nodded. About a third of her page was filled with notes.

“Is that enough to work with, right honey?”

“Yup,” she said.

“Did you ever see ‘Schindler’s List’, dad?” piped up MT, turning round from the computer. I had thought she hadn’t been listening. “We saw it in history class in Grade Twelve.”

“Yeah?” I said, offering no opinion on the Holocaust according to Spielberg.

Sighing, I picked up the TV remote.

For her part, TE pulled a chair up beside her sister, who continued downloading Christina Aguilera songs to burn to a CD.

—2004, December

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Browsing Chapters:



When I went to redeem the \$40 student gift certificate this afternoon in the political science aisle of Chapters bookstore, a fishiness was distinctly sniffed.

After reading a *Guardian* article a few days ago about the Palestinian ‘nakba’ of 1948, I was looking for any works by Edward Said, Chomsky or Norman Finklestein. There were only texts by Israeli and American authors bolstering a Zionist perspective. There were even several copies of the notorious ‘*From Time Immemorial*’, by Joan Peters, promulgating the fiction that the Palestinian identity was a twentieth century creation of Arabs intent on destroying Israel...

Could it be mere coincidence that the owner of Chapters happens to be Heather Reisman, noted to have co-founded the HESEG Foundation for supporting ex-soldiers of the IDF?

After risking that thoughtcrime on her property, I circled back to the magazine section. Hoping to find some coverage of Sharon’s machinations to protect West Bank settlements—I flipped through ‘*Utne*’, ‘*Mother Jones*’, ‘*This Magazine*’ and ‘*The New Internationalist*’. There was the usual fare of environmental exposés, gay rights and feminist advocacy articles. No current issue offered any coverage of the current crisis in the Middle East.

I returned them all to the rack. What cowardice on the left! It seemed that no publisher dared risk their advertising lifeline by including any articles critical of the policies of Likud Israel. Few North American journalists—especially younger and more ambitious ones—dared risk their careers by writing in sympathy with the Palestinian perspective. As for any public figure who dared speak out—there was the risk of being accused of supporting terrorism—or worse, being tarred ‘an antisemite of the far left’... Whither the *cojones* of the 1960s underground press?

In making for the door, I was tempted to tear up the gift certificate. But that would have been deeply disrespectful of my students. Instead, I decided to gift it to one of my kids.

-2005, August

One of us:



Even the most rabid hawks of AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) could hardly have wished for a more polished performance than that given by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this afternoon on CNN.

Speaking live from Jerusalem, in a background of bookshelves and crossed Israeli and American flags, he appeared senatorial and calm. With hands folded on desk, in his perfectly modulated baritone he assured that Israel would be glad to negotiate for peace. But alas, in a “dangerous neighbourhood” subjected to “relentless terror attacks”, he insisted that Israel had “no credible negotiating partner.”

It is interesting that no Israeli leader has been so suavely American in speech and in gesture than Netanyahu. Raised in a suburb of Philadelphia, educated at MIT and Harvard—he could easily pass as an American brahmin, rather like Mitt Romney with whom he once partnered in a financial consultancy firm. Yet no Israeli leader—not even Ariel Sharon—had been more ultra-Zionist or hostile to the mere notion of a Palestinian state...

Meanwhile, no other Israeli leader—even Golda Meir who spent her early life in Milwaukee—has so deeply imbued American culture. Netanyahu has a canny understanding of mainstream America’s fear of ‘the other’ and masterfully plays upon it...

The CNN segment was a perfect opportunity to do just that. Followed by a short interview with PLO chief, Mahmoud Abbas, the back-to-back appearances provided a stark contrast:

The Palestinian chairman is no less cultivated than Netanyahu—but his studies at the University of Damascus and Moscow’s Patrice Lumumba University afford nothing for American public relations... Indeed, his white moustache is vaguely Stalinesque.

For the CNN interview, Abbas appeared in his West Bank studio between a Palestinian flag and a portrait of the late Yasser Arafat on the wide desk. His dark blue suit was perhaps hoped to be more palatable to an American audience than the khaki fatigues and keffiyeh of his predecessor. But he seemed fidgety—even sour—in delivering his lines. His comments about “Israeli hypocrisy” and America not being “an ‘honest broker’” could have been read from cue cards... Even the Arabic accent was suspiciously foreign to the American ear...

The final moments showed the two adversaries in a split screen. The host, Wolf Blitzer, asked if “both sides” are willing to negotiate...

Abbas quickly stated the demand that Israel withdraw to the pre-1967 borders. He was speaking about the right of return for displaced Palestinians while on the other side of the split-screen—Netanyahu tut-tutted, shook head and smiled... He calmly asked if the Palestinian leader had any interest in ending suicide bombing...

Before Abbas could reply, the screen went full on Netanyahu's face. Smiling, he knew his audience '*got it*'—that any notion Israel would ever remotely consider giving up land for a terrorist state was absurd... The camera then cut back to Blitzer thanking the participants and talking up the next story after the commercial break.

As in every item on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict covered on cable news, the audience was left without a scintilla of doubt as to who is—*gobble gobble*—*one of us*...

-2010, April



The doppelganger on ‘Schindler’s List’:

When Spielberg’s ‘*Schindler’s List*’ made its splash debut in 1993, I had little interest in seeing it on the big screen.

It was hard to swallow that the director of ‘*Raiders of the Lost Ark*’ and ‘*E.T.*’ could be the *auteur* so hailed. Its fawning reviews and predictable slew of academy awards seemed patronizing. Could a big budget Hollywood film about the Holocaust be declared as anything less than a masterpiece?

For all of that and more—I was not disposed to embrace it. I did not need to be ‘educated’ about the Holocaust. Like most North Americans, I imbued the ‘*never again*’ lesson from childhood—although more from classrooms than from movie theatres. I am of the generation who remembers when Hollywood avoided the subject of Hitler’s mass murders. The Holocaust was once regarded as sacred memory not to be exploited for entertainment. Yet in more recent years, as Norman Finkelstein has noted, it has almost become an industry in service to the Israeli lobby...

I too, have come to agree that Holocaust victimhood does not give licence to the present-day militant state of Israel to keep its boot on the necks of Palestinians.

So it was that I avoided *Schindler’s List*’ until the late 1990s when it was released on VHS video. I was most impressed by the acting: particularly of Ralph Fiennes as the sadistic Nazi officer and Ben Kingsley as Schindler’s Jewish accountant. But I still did not buy into the hype of ‘*Schindler’s List*’ being among the “greatest films ever made”.

I found it revealing that among the few dissenters to proclaiming the movie’s unassailable excellence was French director, Claude Lanzmann. He notably made ‘*Shoah*’ (1985) the acclaimed nine-hour documentary about the Holocaust. He called ‘*Schindler’s List*’ a “kitschy melodrama” and a “deformation of historical truth” concocted largely for an uninformed American audience.

Still, wondering how Spielberg’s *oeuvre* had ‘aged’, I streamed it over three nights last week on Amazon Prime:

The political aspects of a Hollywood portrayal the Holocaust still nagged. Yet after twenty-five years, the movie was itself a moment of history portraying history. With that contextual distancing, I was more disposed to take it largely as entertainment.

So, in this last viewing, disbelief was suspended. I was drawn in by the cinematographic detail and was often rapt in the drama. The final scene, in colour, of the actual survivors with their families paying homage at the grave of Oskar Schindler, was especially moving. If the aim was to maximize empathy with the victims depicted—on that level, the film certainly worked. On the whole, I thought it a very *good* American movie, but by standards of world cinema—not exceptionally *great*.

Yet one image stuck disturbingly in mind long after the TV screen went dark. It came at the end of a sequence in which an old man profusely thanks Schindler [Liam Neeson] for his hiring as a

machinist. Schindler looks away in embarrassment when he sees that the old man has only one arm. Schindler afterwards upbraids his accountant, Stern, for hiring the old amputee. He tells him the hiring could make a mockery of his factory's 'indispensable' able-bodied work force of which the Nazi overseers needed to be convinced.

In a subsequent scene, the Jewish workers are shown shovelling snow under the orders of Nazi guards. When one guard sees the one-armed old man trying to wield a shovel, he coldly shoots him in the head. The camera pulls back and lingers on the dark blood seeping into the snow and onto the empty sleeve...

I was appropriately rattled.

2023, August


