

Correspondence

THE MEDIA AND THE MIDEAST MESSAGE

To the Editors: (Re: "Pioneering on the West Bank," by Grace Halsell, *Worldview*, December, 1980.) Prior to February, 1979, when I went for a year-and-a-half stay in Israel and Egypt, I felt strongly that militarily occupied territories should be returned to indigenous peoples who made their homes there. After extensive research and first-hand experience in many parts of the oft-mentioned areas, I have come to realize that in terms of peace this would accentuate the already tense atmosphere and destroy the threads of communication so painstakingly formed.

What exacerbates tension is the media coverage of events in the Middle East, usually cited as the "Arab-Israeli conflict." By isolating one link of hostility from a chaotic chain, the Western press has fostered the misconception that the many-faceted problems in this region center on the issue of Jews vs. Moslems. Ill-defining a crisis is as dangerous as incorrectly diagnosing the symptoms of a suffering patient. Diagnosis determines treatment; the improper selection of therapy may not only fail to rectify it but may compound it as well....To treat the Mideast syndrome in terms that present Israel as a foreign agent intruding on a placid, smooth-functioning organ is no more effective than treating cancer with a bandaid. As A. M. Soloway commented, the conflict with Israel is only a "symptom in a pervasive pattern of Arab unwillingness to accept any non-Arab or non-Moslemic minority in its midst."

The evidence of oppression wielded against non-Arab and Moslem minorities is well documented and mostly overlooked. Kurds and Assyrians in Iraq, Coptics in Egypt, Berbers in Algeria, Druze in Syria, non-Moslem blacks in the Sudan, and Christians in Jordan and Libya have a long history of political, economic, and physical hardship in their homelands. "Palestinians" lived in the squalor and filth of the West Bank and Gaza refugee camps under the rule of their gun-toting, finger-pointing brethren for nineteen years,

held captive in poverty as pawns in the inhuman political chess match against Jewish autonomy. The issue of Israel is magnified because the Israelis are the only independent people to have withstood the waves of aggression....

The dream of a pan-Arab hegemony, a unified empire stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, in which there is no room for national or religious minorities' rights or privileges, is coinciding with a worldwide swing to conservatism. Patriotism and nationalistic fervor are logical steps arising out of this *zeitgeist*....

Would the tensions cease, or the oil flow more freely, were Israel to vanish from the earth? Yasir Arafat, chief of the PLO, gives us an indication in his words of November 16, 1974, to the *New Republic*: "Palestine is only a small drop in the great Arab ocean. Our nation is the Arab nation extending from the Atlantic Sea to the Red Sea and beyond."

To risk Israel's geographic lifelines in the vain hope of quenching a rising Moslem-inspired thirst is an ill-advised course of action....By continuing to categorize these problems as the "Arab-Israeli conflict" we will see only the symptoms and not the causes....The media have an obligation to define correctly the issues we face. We cannot fight what we cannot see.

J. Alan Rich

Lansing, Mich.

A PRISON TALE

To the Editors: On October 27, I and twenty-nine other Americans were released by Fidel Castro's government. My friend Melvin Bailey and I had been serving a prison sentence at the Combinado del Este Prison in Havana for dropping Christian literature from an airplane over Cuba.

After crashing in Cuba due to malfunctioning equipment in a storm, and almost out of fuel, we were taken by jet to Havana, handcuffed, and then placed in solitary confinement for three months. For several weeks I had a hood tied over my head. I was thrown in various refrigerated cells, each colder than the last. I was told I was dying of cancer and was accused of being a CIA agent. I was forcefully placed in a urinal and told that the U.S. thought I was dead. I was told that unless I cooperated I

would never see my family again.

We had one visit near the end of our solitary confinement. The State Department official was our first ray of hope....Although we had been incommunicado for two months, the U.S. diplomat said that all he could do was tell our families of our situation.

We had a trial that lasted ninety minutes. Our defense attorney, whom we had never seen before, asked us four questions: "How old are you? Are you married? Do you have any children? What's your occupation?" Two of the five judges slept, and the prosecutor ridiculed us for our faith in God. We were sentenced to twenty-four years....

One of the highest moments of my time in prison was attending a church service held by Cuban political prisoners. The Cuban prisoners maintain their Christian services because no church either in Cuba or from abroad is permitted to minister to them. Their hymns, repeatedly confiscated, are hand-copied on cigarette package paper. Their pulpit is a bed sheet draped over a board. They are led by a Protestant and a Catholic: Noble Alexander, a minister, and Andres Vargas Gomez.

Vargas Gomez, in his sixties, has been in prison since 1960. He is a writer and attorney. He suffers from asthma and is very weak, and even so he gave me his egg ration when I was sick.

I was in the hospital for two months with Armando Valladares, the Cuban poet. His legs are paralyzed as a result of prison mistreatment. His therapy equipment, donated by Amnesty International, was thrown by the authorities in a corner of his room like a pile of junk, where it lies now. He is given no treatment. As of a few weeks ago, Dr. Puentes ordered his protein diet discontinued. He is not allowed letters or visits. His family photos were taken away. [See "Boniatto Prison: Tale of a Massacre," including Valladares' poems and a letter smuggled out of prison, in *Worldview*, October, 1977—Eds.]

During my time in Castro's prisons sixteen "lancheros" (those wanting to leave Cuba) were beaten with iron pipes, steel cables, machetes, and clubs. One we know died. These were beatings by officials—including lieutenants Salcinas and Calzada. I saw Mario Chanes, the revolutionary leader who fought against the Batista dictatorship, brutally beaten by a guard in the hospital. Early this year I saw a young man

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