

Dreams and delusions

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DURING the last days of July, Representative Tom Delay (Republican) of Texas, the House majority leader and described routinely as one of the three or four most powerful men in Washington, delivered himself of his opinions regarding the roadmap and the future of peace in the Middle East. What he had to say was meant as an announcement for a trip he subsequently took to Israel and several Arab countries where, it is reported, he articulated the same message.

In no uncertain terms, Delay declared himself opposed to the Bush administration's support for the roadmap, especially the provision in it for a Palestinian state. "It would be a terrorist state" he said emphatically, using the word "terrorist" as has become habitual in official American discourse without regard for circumstance, definition, or concrete characteristics.

He went on to add that he came by his ideas concerning Israel by virtue of what he described as his convictions as a "Christian Zionist," a phrase synonymous not only with support for everything Israel does, but also for the Jewish state's theological right to go on doing what it does regardless of the fact whether or not a few million "terrorist" Palestinians get hurt in the process.

The sheer number of people in the southwestern United States who think like Delay is an imposing 60-70 million and, it should be noted, included among them is none other than George W. Bush, who is also an inspired born-again Christian for whom everything in the Bible is meant to be taken literally. Bush is their leader and surely depends on their votes for the 2004 election which, in my opinion, he will not win. And because his presidency is threatened by his ruinous policies at home and abroad, he and his campaign strategists are trying to attract more Christian right-wingers from other parts of the country, the Middle West especially.

Altogether then, the views of the Christian Right (allied with the ideas and lobbying power of the rabidly pro-Israeli neo-conservative movement) constitute a formidable force in domestic American politics, which is the domain where, alas, the debate about the Middle East takes place in America. One must always remember that in America, Palestine and Israel are regarded as local, not foreign policy, matters.

Thus, were Delay's pronouncements simply to have been either the personal opinions of a religious enthusiast or the dreamlike ramblings of an inconsequential visionary, one could dismiss them quickly as nonsense. But in fact, they represent a language of power that is not easily opposed in America, where so many citizens believe themselves to be guided directly by God in what they see and believe, and sometimes do. John Ashcroft, the attorney-general, is reported to begin each working day in his office with a collective prayer meeting. Fine, people want to pray, they are constitutionally allowed total religious liberty.

But in Delay's case, by saying what he has said against an entire race of people, the Palestinians, that they would constitute a whole country of "terrorists," that is, enemies of humankind in the current Washington definition of the word, he has seriously hampered their progress toward self-determination, and gone some way in imposing further punishment and suffering on them, all on religious grounds. By what right?

Consider the sheer inhumanity and imperialist arrogance of Delay's position: from a powerful eminence ten thousand miles away, people like him, who are as ignorant about the actual life of Arab Palestinians as the man in the moon, can actually rule against and delay Palestinian freedom, and assure years more of oppression and suffering, just because he thinks they are all terrorists and

because his own Christian Zionism — where neither proof nor reason counts for very much — tells him so. So, in addition to the Israeli lobby here, to say nothing of the Israeli government there, Palestinian men, women and children have to endure more obstacles and more roadblocks placed in their way in the US Congress. Just like that.

What also struck me about the Delay comments wasn't only their irresponsibility and their easy, uncivilized (a word very much in use concerning the war against terrorism) dismissal of thousands of people who have done him no wrong whatever, but also the unreality, the delusional unreality his statements share with so much of official Washington so far as discussions of (and policy toward) the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam are concerned. This has reached new levels of

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intense, and even inane abstraction in the period since the events of September 11.

Hyperbole, the technique of finding more and more excessive statements to describe and over-describe a situation, has ruled the public realm, beginning of course with Bush himself, whose metaphysical statements about good and evil, the axis of evil, the light of the almighty and his endless, dare I call them sickening effusions about the evils of terrorism, have taken language about human history and society to new, dysfunctional levels of pure, ungrounded polemic.

All of this laced with solemn sermons and declarations to the rest of the world to be pragmatic, to avoid extremism, to be civilized and rational, even as US policy makers with untrammelled executive power can legislate the change of regime here, an invasion there, a "re-construction" of a country there, all from within the confines of their plush air-conditioned Washington offices. Is this a way of setting standards for civilized discussion and advancing democratic values, including the very idea of democracy itself?

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This notion is part of the same ideological arsenal used in the 19th century to justify colonial oppression: "Negroes" can't speak properly therefore, according to Thomas Carlyle, they must remain enslaved; "the Chinese" language is complicated and therefore, according to Ernest Renan, the Chinese man or woman is devious and should be kept down; and so on and so forth. No one takes such ideas seriously today, except for when Arabs, Arabic, and Arabists are concerned.

In a paper he wrote a few years ago, Francis Fukuyama, the right-wing pontificator and philosopher who was briefly celebrated for his preposterous "end of history" idea, said that the state department was well rid of its Arabists and Arabic speakers because by learning that language they also learned the "delusions" of the Arabs. Today, every village philosopher in the media, including pundits like Thomas Friedman, chatters on in the same vein, adding in their scientific descriptions of the Arabs that one of the many delusions of Arabic is the commonly held "myth" that the Arabs have of themselves as a people.

According to such authorities as Friedman

and Fouad Ajami, the Arabs are simply a loose collection of vagrants, tribes with flags, masquerading as a culture and a people. One might point out that that itself is a hallucinatory Orientalist delusion, which has the same status as the Zionist belief that Palestine was empty, and that the Palestinians were not there and certainly don't count as a people. One scarcely needs to argue against the validity of such assumptions, so obviously do they derive from fear and ignorance.

But that is not all. Arabs are always being berated for their inability to deal with reality, to prefer rhetoric to facts, to wallow in self-pity and self-aggrandizing rather than in sober recitals of the truth. The new fashion is to refer to the UNDP report of last year as an "objective" account of Arab self-indictment. Never mind that the report, as I have pointed

out, is a shallow and insufficiently reflective social science graduate student paper designed to prove that Arabs can tell the truth about themselves, and it is pretty far below the level of decades of Arab critical writing from the time of Ibn Khaldun to the present. All that is pushed aside, as is the imperial context which the UNDP authors blithely ignore, the better perhaps to prove that their thinking is in line with American pragmatism.

Other experts often say that, as a language, Arabic is imprecise and incapable of expressing anything with any real accuracy. In my opinions, such observations are so ideologically mischievous as not to require argument. But I think we can get an idea of what drives such opinions forward by looking for an instructive contrast at one of the great successes of American pragmatism and how it shows how our present leaders and authorities deal with reality in sober and realistic terms.

I hope the irony of what I am discussing will quickly be evident. The example I have in mind is American planning for post-war Iraq. There is a chilling account of this in the August 4 issue of the *Financial Times* in which we are informed that Douglas Feith and Paul Wolfowitz, unelected officials who are among the most powerful of the hawkish neo-conservatives in the Bush administration with exceptionally close ties to Israel's Likud Party, ran a group of experts in the Pentagon "who all along felt that this [the war and its aftermath] was not just going to be a cakewalk [a slang term for something so easy to do that little effort would be needed], it [the whole thing] was going to be 60-90 days, a flip-over and hand-off... to Chalabi and the Iraqi National Council. The Department of Defence could then wash its hands of the whole affair and depart quickly, smoothly, and swiftly. And there would be a democratic Iraq that was amenable to our wishes and desires left in its wake. And that's all there was to it."

We now know, of course, that the war was indeed fought on these premises and Iraq militarily occupied on just those totally far-fetched imperialist assumptions. Chalabi's record as informant and banker is, after all, not of the best. And now, no one needs to be reminded of what has happened in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The terrible shambles, from the looting and pillaging of libraries and museums (which is absolutely the responsibility of the US military as occupying power), the total breakdown of the infrastructure, the hostility of the Iraqis — who are not after all a homogeneous single group — to Anglo-American forces, the insecurity and shortages of daily life in Iraq, and above all, the extraordinary human — I emphasize the word "human" — incompetence of Garner, Bremer and all their minions and soldiers, inadequately addressing the problems of post-war Iraq, all this testifies to the kind of ruinous sham pragmatism and realism of American thinking which is supposed to be in sharp contrast to that of lesser, pseudo-peoples like the Arabs who are full of delusions and a faulty language to boot.

To be concluded