**Wrong at the top of their voices**

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The brilliant and incisive Palestinian American professor, Dr. Ibrahim Abu Lughod, was a mentor who taught me some invaluable lessons about politics and history. While he was a profoundly political being, he was at heart a historian. He, therefore, cautioned me not to be unduly influenced by each day’s headlines or the reactions of commentators to daily events. History, he would say, is like the ocean. And daily events are like the waves or the tides that repeat, over and over again. In judging the significance of events, one should not be swayed by the ebbs and flows. It is more important to look below the surface at the deep currents that are shaping these events and play a role in determining their meaning.

I often think of this lesson when I read opinion pieces in the daily press or listen to television pundits commenting on matters ranging from domestic politics to war and peace in various parts of the globe. Like reeds blowing in the wind, they make snap and often uninformed judgements based on what just happened that day. Because they speak with authority, they are believed and are echoed by others. As a result, they help to create an “accepted wisdom” about the meaning of events which, despite being wrong, shape broad public understanding and even policy. Those who disagree with this “wisdom” are scoffed at and dismissed.

[ILT20 delivers on promise of local players’ development](https://www.nation.com.pk/10-Dec-2022/ilt20-delivers-on-promise-of-local-players-development)

With Ibrahim’s lesson in mind, I’ve tried to avoid this and, as a result, often found myself on the outside of this “accepted wisdom.” For example, I was on a network TV program during Lebanon’s massive March 8th demonstrations demanding the removal of Syrian forces from the country. When a respected journalist said the size of the demonstrations and his “sources” in Lebanon told him that “all segments of Lebanese society were united in this goal,” I countered that as much as I too wanted Syria out, we had just finished a poll in Lebanon and found the country divided down the middle as to whether the Syrians should stay or leave.

Much the same happened when the Obama administration was preparing to bomb Libya. The host of a show I was on asked me if I agreed that removing Qaddafi was a good thing. I countered that it might be but the dangers of the country falling apart and entering a period of prolonged strife had to be considered before any rash action was taken. He countered “that wasn’t the answer I was looking for” before moving on to the next guest who gave him the agreement he sought. If there are any constants in punditry, it’s that lessons are never learned and being mesmerized by the authoritative sound of one’s own voice is enough to pass for wisdom.

[Bilal, Sami reach 18&U final of 35th Federal Cup National Ranking Tennis](https://www.nation.com.pk/10-Dec-2022/bilal-sami-reach-18-u-final-of-35th-federal-cup-national-ranking-tennis)

Recall, the near euphoria with which the TV commentators greeted George W. Bush’s grossly premature “Mission Accomplished” speech. Or the uncritical acceptance that accompanied Trump’s decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Or, more recently, the certainty expressed that Ukraine had turned the corner and Putin’s days were numbered. Or the predictions that there was certain to be a “red wave” that would take decisive control over both Houses of Congress. Imagine if we scored political pundits the same way we do the performance of professional athletes. Their records would be so poor, they would be dropped and never heard from again.

It’s not just that the commentators are wrong. It’s that they’re wrong with such certainty and are believed by the public and policymakers alike. And the reason they make the mistakes they do is precisely because they never had Ibrahim Abu Lughod as a mentor. Lacking in an understanding of history or concrete data, they allow themselves to be swayed by a combination of conventional wisdom and the ebb and flow of events. And that is a recipe for error and disaster.