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OPINION

The death of an illusion



richLOWRY

Special to Florida Weekly

In the great Middle East whodunit, the verdict is in: The Jews are innocent. They aren't responsible for the violence, extremism, backwardness, discontent or predatory government of their Arab neighbors.

The past few months should have finally shattered the persistent illusion that the Israeli-Palestinian question determines all in the Middle East. In an essay in Foreign Policy magazine titled "The False Religion of Mideast Peace," former diplomat Aaron David Miller recounts the conventional wisdom running back through the Cold War: "An unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict would trigger ruinous war, increase Soviet influence, weaken Arab moderates, strengthen Arab radicals, jeopardize access to Middle East oil, and generally undermine U.S. influence from Rabat to Karachi."

Behind these assumptions has long stood a deeply simplistic understanding of the Arabs. Professional naïf Jimmy

Carter insists, "There is no doubt: The heart and mind of every Muslim is affected by whether or not the Israeli-Palestinian issue is dealt with fairly." This is reductive to the point of insult. Carter thinks that Muslims have no interior lives of their own, but are all defined by a foreign-policy dispute that is unlikely to affect most of them directly in the least. He mistakes real people for participants in an endless Council on Foreign Relations seminar.

Adam Garfinkle muses in his book "Jewcentricity": "Imagine, if you can, that one day Israelis decided to pack their bags and move away, giving the country to the Palestinians with a check for 60 years' rent. Would the Arabs suddenly stop competing among themselves, and would America and the Arab world suddenly fall in love with each other?"

Yet the pull of the illusion is so powerful that even those who don't profess to believe in it, like George W. Bush, eventually get sucked in. Barack Obama came into office ready to deploy his charm and fulfill the millennial promise of the peace process once and for all. He couldn't even get the Palestinians to sit down to negotiate with the Israelis, in an unintended "reset" to the situation decades ago.

According to the illusion, the region should have exploded in rage at Jewish perfidy and American ineffectualness. It exploded for altogether different reasons. We witnessed revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt without a hint of upset at the Israeli settlements or America's continued failure as a broker of peace.

It'd be easier if the key to the Middle East really were sitting around a negotiating table with a couple of bottles of Evian, poring over a map adjudicating a dispute so familiar that people have built diplomatic, academic and journalistic careers on it. The current terrain of the Middle East as it exists — not as we assume it should be — is hellishly disorienting by comparison: What to do when an ally invades another ally to knock around protesters in violation of our values? When a tin-pot dictator thumbs his nose at us and the rest of the West and crushes his opponents with alacrity despite our earnest protestations? When popular uprisings threaten our allies more than our enemies?

It makes the old peace process seem alluringly comfortable and manageable. No, the illusion will never die. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Florida tomato industry can be the pride of U.S. agriculture

To the Editor:

Today, March 31, is the birthday of Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers. He would have turned 84. His legacy of advancing justice for the men and women who harvest our nation's crops continues through the work of the Coalition of Immokalee workers, Collier County's award-winning organization of tomato pickers.

Today also is the day several dozen members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches — representing 80 million Christians worldwide, including the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ — are in Southwest Florida visiting the CIW. They were drawn here by the landmark agreement reached in November between the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange and the CIW.

That agreement has become a true beacon of hope and a model for economic justice such that 90 percent of our state's tomato harvesters now enjoy a strict code of conduct to protect their labor rights. The agreement also provides for a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program and a worker-to-worker education process as well as a penny-per-pound wage increase for tomatoes sold to participating retailers.

The WCRC's newly elected president, Jerry Pillay of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, along with pastors, seminary professors, theologians and



LAURA EMIKO SOLTIS / COURTESY PHOTO

lay people from 16 different countries and six continents are meeting here to plan the WCRC's economic justice work on an international level. They have asked to join with local farmworkers at 5 p.m. today in a peaceful demonstration in front of the Publix at Immokalee Road and Collier Boulevard. They hope to encourage Publix to accept the CIW's invitation to talk, to at last break bread together with the admirable aim of addressing the poverty pay facing Florida farmworkers.

Unfortunately, Publix has refused to join with Whole Foods and others to pay an extra penny a pound to help relieve farmworker poverty. However, recent statements suggest that Publix may be more open to that agreement than previously indicated. A new post on the company website states: "Publix

is more than willing to pay a penny more per pound ...however, we will not pay employees of other companies directly for their labor." Instead, Publix recommends that growers "put the cost of the tomatoes in the price they charge the industry for the goods."

The CIW has clarified that in fact that's exactly how the program works: "Repackers charge the extra penny to the retail buyer and those funds are then accounted for and passed on to the growers. It is price based. For most buyers, unless they themselves prefer a different system, the Fair Food premium is built directly into the price."

Publix's declaration of a willingness to pay the penny if the way can be found underscores the importance of company officials sitting down with the CIW to address the mechanics of passing the penny on to workers. Only through dialogue can the noble common objective of ensuring fair wages and safe work conditions for farmworkers be met.

We welcome the interest of the WCRC in the work of CIW for economic justice. We rejoice in this opportunity to celebrate Mr. Chavez' birthday. We further believe the world's attention to the agreement between the CIW and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange reinforces the need for Publix to formally embrace the code of conduct they claim to support, and to work together with the CIW and the FTGE to truly make the Florida tomato industry the pride of U.S. agriculture. ■

— Rev. Dr. Thomas Harp
Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
— Rev. Dr. Ron Patterson
Naples United Church of Christ