Correspondence

THE MEDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST 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 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 Middle East 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 foreign agent intruding on a placid, smooth functioning organ is no more effective than treating cancer with a statistical fervor are logical steps arising out of this zeitgeist....

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."

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.

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 "Bonito 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 Salcines and Calzada. I saw Mario Chances, 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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