

When Free Speech Doesn't Come Free

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Free speech is not without consequence. In the United States, for example, criticism of Israel is tantamount to heresy. Former US President Jimmy Carter felt a societal backlash last year after the release of his book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, which condemned Israel's apartheid-style policies in the occupied Palestinian territories. Consequently, and without foundation, Carter was branded by many in the American press as a one-sided, anti-Semitic propagandist. Similarly, Harvard professor Stephen Walt and University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer were lambasted for a paper the two co-authored that discussed the power of the Israel lobby and its adverse effect on American policy. Additionally, Norman Finkelstein, an esteemed professor at Depaul University and author of the bestselling book, *The Holocaust Industry*, witnessed a McCarthyite-style campaign mounted against him when he came up for tenure. Finkelstein, the son of Holocaust survivors, has been an outspoken critic of Israel's human rights abuses and of pro-Israel apologist and Harvard professor, Alan Dershowitz. Predictably, it was Dershowitz who led the anti-tenure campaign against him; ultimately, Finkelstein was not only denied tenure, but he lost his job at Depaul.

The attacks against Carter, Finkelstein, Walt and Mearsheimer serve as a few well-known examples of the consequences writers and intellectuals face when they breach the line and criticize Israel. Furthermore, the condemnation writers and intellectuals of Arab descent face are invariably higher than Jews of conscience, former presidents, and highly regarded academics. As a result, many writers often acquiesce to the demands of the mainstream. Their self-censorship usually appears in the form of "toning down the message," be it to please editors or critics—essentially to conform to the reality of purported pragmatism. Yet, this "pragmatism" is a euphemism for acceptance of a repressive status quo and is analogous to the "necessary" practical thinking that silenced a multitude of commentators during the Oslo years—the supposed time of peace. Unsurprisingly, untold Palestinian suffering followed as a result of increased settlement expansion, land confiscation, checkpoints and seizures, and the ultimate failure of Camp David 2000.

Shying away from perceived controversial matters may help to protect a mainstream career, but the intent of a political analyst should not be to produce works of fiction. The vast majority of Americans weren't open to criticism of US policy during the run-up to the war on Iraq, mainly due to the media's complicity in promoting the war, but criticism was still the appropriate course of action based on the facts, and Americans would have been better off for it today.

A man who combined principle, activism, and human appeal quite masterfully was distinguished educator and commentator, Edward Said. In the realm of academia and Middle East analysis, Said was by no means viewed as the quintessential radical. Nonetheless, his positions were radical when juxtaposed with "conventional wisdom": he was a proponent of

the one-state solution, an unwavering critic of the Israeli government, and an ardent supporter of the ostensibly controversial right of return. Said was still heavily criticized throughout his career and endured incessant attacks by his detractors, yet his accessible personality and articulate message kept him relevant.

Sadly, Said's relative acceptance has been the exception rather than the rule. In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on putative pragmatic dialogue. However, this accentuation on so-called rational and balanced thinking has proven to be little more than a sinister means to pressure the oppressed to accept the position of the oppressor. The greatest leaders of the last hundred years didn't shy away from controversy; they remained persistent, and saw their visions brought to fruition; be they Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, or Mahatma Gandhi. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook that even paramount figures have been castigated for "overstepping" their boundaries, namely Martin Luther King who was chided for speaking out against the war in Vietnam, imperialism, and social injustices that plagued the US.

This week, Palestinians across the US commemorated 60 years of displacement. Yet, the lens the Palestinian people are expected to look through under the pragmatist vision is one that sees a dispossessed people as necessary victims for a righteous state to take form. Unfortunately, waves of writers and commentators continue to adopt this line in fear of retribution, in exchange for nicer houses and comfortable livings, or a combination of both. That is their free will. Free speech is not without consequence. Nonetheless, losing piece of mind is the only repercussion a writer should fear.

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