

The War on Terror and Democracy

An Arab American Perspective

Neal AbuNab

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To my two angels: Dignity and Respect

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Foreword

This book is a collection of essays and articles published primarily in the Arab American News in 2005-2006, in the metro Detroit area where the largest concentration of Arabs outside the Middle East lives. I am grateful to the publisher of the Arab American News and its editorial staff for their devotion to bringing to the American people an alternative point of view. A perspective that Americans rarely hear in the mainstream media.

It's been almost five years since the tragic attacks of 9/11 which triggered the war on terror and initiated a policy of spreading democracy in the Arab and Muslim world. The name of this book comes from this critical subject that had a profound effect on people's lives here and abroad. It has affected every one from the way we look at flying to new attitudes towards religion to the way we approach social justice.

What has this war achieved so far? How long do we expect it to continue? Will there be an end to this war? What does victory look like? All these are questions that I attempt to answer in my weekly columns and frequent commentary. The Arab American perspective is unique because it appreciates the two sides of this story and it offers an insight that is missing in the US corporate media.

Most of the talking heads that dominate this debate are either extreme right-wingers or extreme left-wingers and cool heads rarely prevail. This conflict will require the United States to change its attitude and behavior towards Arab and Muslim nations. Anyone who claims that change has to come from the other side alone is in denial. By the act of war in Afghanistan and Iraq America had already changed. But many years of strife and hundreds of thousands of lives can be spared if America adopts a consistent foreign policy that respects the aspirations of Muslim nations.

What do Muslims want? What do Americans want? What does every human being want? Freedom, respect, security and an opportunity to earn a dignified livelihood. It is no mystery that America can end this war in 100 days. It can resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and enforce a universal code of human rights on itself and on every state on earth. But America's heart is divided and it won't apply such a code upon itself. Its internal squabbles are materializing on the world stage and foreign policy is at best inconsistent.

The War on Terror has challenged the tenets of western democracy. Democracy is a movement that reflects the deep faith, culture and heritage of a nation. Post 9/11 America was transformed into a Christian democracy with a Jewish heart. The Middle East can not have a Christian democracy because its heart will always be Muslim.

Democracy in the Arab world will produce non-secular governments such as Hamas in occupied Palestine. This was no secret prior to 9/11 as the experience was tried in the Algerian elections in 1991 and the government nullified the results which led to widespread violence for many years. All over the Arab world, if so called free and democratic elections were held today, they will yield Islamist governments allied with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq will yield in the end the exact opposite result that America hoped for. President George Bush exhausted the now-defunct argument of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD's), and then began peddling the idea of a democratic haven in the midst of all these dictatorships. But the democracy in Iraq will eventually produce a regime that looks more like Iran's than America's. Iraq will become a natural ally of Iran in a conflict with America.

In the past one hundred years, the Arab world has tried every type of government. They imported the secular ideas of communism and capitalism but they were applied in extreme measures always resulting in dictatorships. Monarchies are still around and they continue to thrive as they dig their heels deeper installing feudal lords and tribal chiefs with absolute loyalty to the Monarch.

The people of the Arab and Muslim world are angry and hungry. It is a volatile combination that will keep exploding until real democracy evolves from the street level. The United States will finally realize that such Islamist movements of freedom are totally consistent with its founding principles. Till then, we are in for a long and bumpy ride.

Neal AbuNab
April 2006

January 8, 2005

My 2005 Predictions

Celebrating the coming of a new year was first observed in Babylon 4000 years ago. And ever since people have been making New Year's resolutions and going to astrologers to ask if they'd come true.

Astrology has roots in most sciences like Physics and Astronomy. But most of all it digs deep into the metaphysical mysterious world. It exploits man's fascination with the innate fear of the unknown future.

It was told that Nancy Reagan held regular counsel with the "charters of the stars". She had an astrologer pick the date of December 7, 1987, for the apocalyptic meeting between Gorbachev, the Head of the "Evil Empire" back then, and her husband, President Ronald Reagan. It just so happened on that day that the first spark of the Palestinian Intifadha went off.

I am not an Astrologer but I read deep into the political behavior of nations. I try to observe the direction of waves of human sentiment. This science crosses paths with Astrology but I won't put my money on the predictions of either.

Nonetheless, the recent Tsunami has prompted many people to dabble in prophecies and forecast doomsday and the signals that God is sending to mankind. So, I will dabble.

Hasan Al-Sharni, a famous Tunisian Astrologer predicted great political turmoil for 2005; lots of blood culminating in the assassinations of George Bush in the US, Iyad Alawi in Iraq, and Mahmoud Abbas in Palestine. He also foretold of the death of Saddam Hussein before his trial and terrorist attacks in Britain.

Predicting turmoil and blood baths in the Middle East is easy. It's a safe bet and it happens every so many years like clockwork. The stars will be making their cross over in June and into July of 2005. So, please be careful if you're traveling to the Middle East at that time. I won't be making any plans to go near there during these two months.

I read the Torah and the second book of Exodus talks about the liberty of a people from bondage. "The Lord said to Moses, "when you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will

not let the people go.” (Exodus 4:21). Then, God proceeded to inflict the famous Ten Plagues upon the Egyptians. The “Plague of Blood” and then the plagues of Frogs, Gnats, Flies, Livestock, Boils, Hail, Locusts, Darkness and ending with the mother of plagues upon the Firstborn children of Egypt.

Today, the people in bondage are the Palestinians and Pharaoh can easily be Israel’s Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon. The Palestinian child in the year 2000, asked Sharon to let his people go. But this child, armed with a meek stone, was no match to the power and fury of Israel’s Pharaoh. The child faced off with the great big tank, and defied with his innocent courage the symbol of might on earth. But the cowardly sniper’s bullet killed him. It killed the child, Faris Odeh, in November 2000. And the curse began to plague the new People of Israel. The ten plagues of Moses began its course.

I read the Qur’an, the Bible and many other fountains of the human spirit. It’s easy to conclude that God’s cycles come in fours, just like the seasons of the year.

I read the history of mankind and the rise and fall of civilizations. It’s easy to conclude that man’s cycles come in threes; the rise, the plateau and the fall. Or birth, life and death.

Putting the two together gives us complete cycles of sevens, the same as the number of days in the week.

Armed with the above simple information, I bought a couple of Astrology books, read them thoroughly and began making my own charts. I dabbled so to speak. I related the movements of stars to the cycles of God and Man. I came up with an exact date and time for the Day of Judgment.

I plugged in the dates of the Intifadhas, the Peace Accords, the blood baths in Bethlehem, the liberation of Iraq, the volcanoes, the Hurricanes and the Tsunami. According to my charts the Day of Judgment will happen on April 4th, 2009, at Noon.

My colleague Danielle Smith asked: “is that the end of the world?” I said: “or the beginning depending on which way you look at it.”

Most likely, it is the end of the current World Order established by President Bush, the father, back in 1989. A World Order of Tyranny and Violence as a political system to govern people.

A survey revealed that the most common New Year's resolution for Americans was to lose weight or to pay off debt. The Babylonians' most common New Year's resolution was to return borrowed farm equipment. Some things don't change even in 4000 years; human nature remains constant. And humans, like myself, love to dabble in the mysterious nature of the unknown.

January 15, 2005

A Palestinian who wants to Vote

I call Ramallah every so often to check up on the family home. After the passing of my father I inherited a thankless job. I asked my trusted friend, on this occasion, if our Home voted in Sunday's Elections. Since its owners don't have the right to vote.

My friend always gave me the real pulse of the Palestinian Heart. He said that business is the fiber of existence. Insecurity has scared money away. There are no jobs any where, except in Ramallah. People flock there like they're coming to America.

They voted for Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) because he's friends with George W. Bush. They will grab at any straws of hope and optimism. Though, they know Sharon all too well. They know everything rests in his tight fist.

Abdul-Jawad Saleh was the Mayor of neighboring Al-Bireh in 1964. He built our Home. The stone masons hand-crafted every stone. For years, the front yard was a make-shift quarry like a scene from the Flintstones.

But the house was finally built. We were supposed to move in on June 5th, 1967. But instead Israeli tanks rolled in. We became homeless overnight.

The house was guarded by "Abeed" (Black Palestinians from Jericho). We paid them to live in it. They had a family of eight children and the old man died. Then, my father died. His half brothers coveted the house and hovered over it like vultures.

They kicked the “Abeed” out. They let squatters move in. The squatters said they were Fatah. In 1994, I went back to reclaim it from Fatah, the squatters, and the half-uncles.

I gained the trust of the half-uncles by marrying into them. I paid the squatters \$10,000 and reclaimed the sad house. It looked like a junkyard in a Farmington Hills subdivision.

The house told me stories of the Intifadha. People were jailed in its basement, interrogated, and some lost their souls. The bullet holes in the walls whispered tales of steel-tipped heavy Israeli boots. The bomb blasts on the outer facade spoke of resilient resistance. Mortar shells only left black rings of smoke on the invincible Palestinian stone.

I bonded with the House and the land it sat on. I renovated it. I employed needy refugees from close by Al-Amaari camp, who claimed to be Fatah leaders. I gave it all I got. But the land of Milk and Honey had sucked me dry. It turned out to be barren like a wrinkled old prune. It’d become the land of perpetual misery. A land full of stones and thorns. It just produced tears in the end regardless of the noble intentions or the effort.

Abdul-Jawad Saleh was allowed to return. He is a member of the Palestinian Parliament now. He screams and shouts about government reforms and most of his words fall on deaf ears.

Palestinians are worn out by tyranny and violence, from within and from without.

I envy the Iraqis of Dearborn. America begs them to vote. I still whisper to people I am a Palestinian. But in the eyes of the most powerful nations on this earth, I don’t exist.

My father and mother were born and raised in the old city of Jerusalem. My father lost a hundred of his friends in 1947 defending the old city with Abdel-Kader Al-Hussainy. He planted Jerusalem deep in the heart of his children. There is no Palestine without Jerusalem. We were entrusted with Jerusalem by Omar Ibn-Al-Khattab and we became Al-Ansar, or the people who will make Muhammad’s message victorious, till the end of time, or till we perish.

The thorny issues that will never be resolved by Sharon the Pharaoh; the Right of Return; Jerusalem; and a Palestinian border without a single Israeli soldier.

Jews all over the world enjoy an automatic citizenship to my home. While we have become the new "Abeed" of the Arab nations. Poetic justice. I ask God every day to tell me of my sins and the sins of my fathers in order to deserve this fate.

Palestinian elections united and emboldened their heart. What comes next is the big disappointment. Pharaoh (Sharon) does not believe in justice, otherwise he would've let this people go. And so there will be another disappointment and another blood bath. But my trusted friend in Ramallah is not worried. He says "it can't get any worse."

As for the rest of us, the Palestinians who roam this earth in the Twilight Zone, we will insist that as long as we breathe we exist. And as long as we continue to breathe we know we are winning. Even if no one wants to open up the door and say welcome to the dinner table.

January 22, 2005

A Reverend and a Bus Rider

So money can't buy you love. But in America, it buys respect.

A 91-year old Black woman could not pay her rent in Detroit. A church stepped in to help. Reverend Adams said: "it was a simple act of kindness...we did not want to set her out in the streets."

The old lady suffers from dementia. She probably doesn't remember why she moved to Detroit in the first place back in 1957. Back then, Detroit was the "promised land". She had lived in Montgomery, Alabama. And on December 1st, 1955, she sat on a White person's seat in a bus. Back then, Blacks were segregated from Whites and had a designated area usually at the back of the bus.

But she made a stand. She refused to leave her seat.

A 27-year old Black Reverend heard of the incident. He wanted Blacks and Whites to sit wherever they liked in the bus. He called for a boycott of the Public Transportation System.

After 381 days, he was invited to ride in a "racially integrated" bus and to sit wherever he pleased. The young Reverend's name was Martin

Luther King, Jr. And the woman who refused to give up her seat was Rosa Parks.

A boulevard in Detroit bears her name. It would be a disgrace, however, if she became a bum and homeless on a street named after her. Economic realities are harsh, but society can certainly afford an apartment to preserve the old lady's respect and dignity. Riverfront Associates, the owners of the apartment building where she stayed felt that way too. In October of 2004, they graciously allowed her to live rent free for the rest of her days on this earth.

King became a national figure. He advocated for non-violent passive resistance to bring about equality. Then, he talked about his dream of America; a place where Black boys and White girls can hold hands and go to school together.

But many influential people didn't like that dream. So, Bobby Kennedy, then US Attorney General, authorized J.Edgar Hoover, the FBI's Director, to wiretap King and record everything he says, in private and in public, and to follow him wherever he went.

Meanwhile, his brother, John F. Kennedy, the President, met with King. They talked about crafting a federal law that stops discrimination.

The law passed in 1964. It was called the Civil Rights Act. It made discrimination illegal. It made people of all colors, religions, and national origins equal, in the eyes of America.

It was a tide that uplifted everyone. King rose to the top and received a Nobel Peace Prize. But, J.Edgar Hoover threatened to release all the juicy tapes. Hours upon hours of Martin and his private life with all the women that he consorted with.

King came apart, became lonely and felt mentally and physically tired.

He opposed the war that began in Vietnam. He said: "Justice is indivisible. Injustice any where is a threat to justice every where."

Does this story sound familiar? The war in Iraq, Aschroft the Attorney General, opposition to foreign policy, the Patriot Act, wiretapping, and secret evidence. Does history keep repeating itself? Does it tell us that repressive measures simply don't work in the long run? Does it embolden the repressed and make them more determined?

Any way, our friend Mr. King and his journey on this earth were coming to an end. He went to Memphis on April 3rd, 1968, to support the striking Sanitation workers. He said: "I've been to the mountaintop...I've looked over...I've seen the Promised Land...We as a people will get to the Promised Land...My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The next day, he was shot dead. Riots erupted all over the nation. The streets of Detroit became a War Zone. Businesses left and Rosa Parks stayed in the Promised Land. She can ride the bus whenever she wants and she can sit wherever she wants even in her wheelchair. I pray that she has the fare for the ride.

On Monday, January 17th, the nation shut down to celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. In today's America, civil rights have given way to economic rights. You get no respect without hard cash.

Our friend's life was like a shooting star. It delivered its message. It brightened up the skies of the human spirit, for a moment or so. It's up to us to keep the flame alight.

January 29, 2005

Doing God's Work

We had a heavy snowfall last weekend. I waited at a Stop sign and a van rammed into me. I got out of the vehicle and a black middle aged man came out of the van. His voice was loud and said that I had stopped abruptly, and that's why he backed into me.

A fuse lit up inside and I felt my hot Mediterranean temper about to explode. But before uttering a single word I excused myself, went back into the vehicle, smoked a cigarette and came back out with serene calmness.

This time he said he was sorry and offered to fix my vehicle. I told him: "I'd like to take this opportunity to become friends and collect some Forgiveness Capital. I don't want you to fix it. I don't want anything from you. I forgive you and I hope God will forgive some of my sins against others."

President George W. Bush is always busy collecting Political Capital and spending it. He told us on TV in October 2000 that racial profiling was wrong. We voted for him. Then, he spent that capital on Ashcroft and Sharon.

He appointed an Arab apologist, Spencer Abraham, in his cabinet so we could not complain while he spent our capital.

In his second crowning on January 20th, he promised to spend all of his political capital fighting Tyranny across the globe. The word Terrorism totally disappeared from his long inaugural speech. Can we conclude that we exited the War on Terror and entered into the War on Tyranny? But “charity always starts at home” and in one’s own heart.

The English say that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Bush always believed that he was destined to do God’s work. But God also sends Tsunamis upon people.

Pilgrims in Mecca pelted Satan with stones in the Feast of Sacrifice, or Eid Al-Adha for Muslims, as Bush was taking the oath of office. He placed his hand on the Bible, like George Washington first did back in 1789, and said “so help me God.”

But God in His book says that He helps those who help themselves. Bush always described himself as a “results-oriented” person. So, let’s look at the results of the first four years. His government announced this week an all-time record budget deficit of 427 billion dollars for 2005.

American lives are threatened because of an unnecessary war. A record 37 million Americans live below the poverty line. One third of Americans have no health insurance. The Education system is riddled with MEAP scores and has no idea how to advance knowledge in society. Stem cell research and science stopped so we may appease Reverend Pat Robertson and his “moral” message. These are the tangible results of the first term.

In his mind, President Bush “fixed” the Economy and National Security. Now, he promises to turn his attention to Social Security and “fix” it by sending the money to the hungry wolves on Wall Street. The same people he had jailed a couple of years ago during the corporate scandals saga.

His ambitious agenda extends to the entire IRS Tax Code and he will “fix” it the same way he “fixed” our Civil Rights. Democrats are accused of being the “tax and spend” Party. Bush is teaching Republicans to be proud in becoming the “borrow and spend” Party. This way, when pain comes it will be fast and swift. When banks call in the loans and foreclose on the White House.

America is an Economy. Essentially, that’s what keeps people from killing each other. They tolerate each other so they can make money off of each other. The primary job of the President is to preserve and grow the economy.

But this President was born with the silver spoon in his mouth. He appointed a Mexican immigrant, Carlos Gutierrez, as the new Commerce Secretary. Gutierrez had climbed the ladder from humble beginnings as a truck driver all the way to the CEO of Kellogg company. But commerce can not advance with a President erecting walls of separation and building barriers between nations and peoples.

Bush is following economic policies that America’s Clinton advised other nations not to do, back in the roaring nineties. The Mexican Peso collapsed to one quarter of its value in 1995. The Indonesian Rupiah lost 80 percent of its value in 1997. The US dollar will have to continue its decline against the Euro in order to correct the imbalances in the economy.

This President has an amusing personality and character while he insists on doing God’s work in allowing the starving Iraqis to vote. They are to vote on a slate of “good” Iraqis. Why not put a Referendum on Occupation on the ballot? And forget about the slate.

But history is not kind to occupations. Not in an election and not anywhere. The President himself does not pretend to justify it.

America today is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy on all fronts.

This President is obsessed with Iraq the same way the Roman Emperor Nero was obsessed with persecuting Christians. Nero Claudius Caesar initiated the Christian persecution after Rome was burnt. He murdered his own mother and his wife for the love of power. He committed suicide in A.D. 68. He reached the same result that all megalomaniac Emperors inevitably reach. The way Marc Antony and Cleopatra went before him, and the way Adolf Hitler followed them a couple of millennia later. They were all “results-oriented.”

Life is a journey. It is a way. Moses pointed to the way. Jesus said follow the way. And Muhammad fashioned the way in his lifetime. Civilization is about the way of human oneness. The way of respecting each other as equals. Good results are a natural outcome of following the righteous way.

On this auspicious occasion, the meek on this earth offer Caesar in the White House a prayer; let go of “political capital” and get on the path of collecting “forgiveness capital.”

February 5, 2005

Democracy by the barrel of a gun

Once there was a big chicken who thought she was a dog. She appeared before the chicken masses and barked. The masses clapped, cheered and then retreated to their coops. They felt sorry, more for themselves than for the chicken who dared to be dog.

One day, a fox raided the coop and ate its fill of the screaming chicken. The chicken-dog barked and tried its best to defend the coop but it had no sharp teeth.

Saddam Hussein was a schizophrenic chicken. He was not a Big Dog, as they call big men in hip-hop lingo.

Remember Jay Garner, the first US envoy to Iraq, right after the fall of Baghdad. He had prior experience in successfully re-engineering the Kurdish region of Iraq in 1992.

He had it right. His solution was based on understanding Arab customs and the way they organized themselves. He took notice of the strong family bonds that flowed seamlessly to the tribal leader, who consulted with Sheikhs and pledged his loyalty to a regional Chieftain.

Nation-building is about organizing society. It is not about the construction of roads and sewer plants. Democracy is about participation and not just conducting elections.

Remember Paul Bremer, the second US envoy to Iraq. He was famous for wearing boots with his suit and tie. The boots were a symbol of the

kind of democracy his bosses in the Pentagon were determined to install in Iraq.

A democracy by the barrel of a gun. A democracy shoved down the throat of people. A democracy based on fear and violence.

Iraqis believed that freedom always followed liberation. But America did not send an army of lawyers and educators to speak the language of democracy.

The Iraqis only saw American boys with big toys firing big guns that hurt a lot of little people. Iraqis only saw the ugly face of occupation, where dialogue was done by the barrel of a gun.

Let's cut to the chase. Elections in Iraq were not just a good thing. They were the most excellent thing that has happened to Iraq in a long time. We want to see elections taking place in every country in the Middle East. That is our clear objective as Arab Americans.

We want to see the feathers of Big Chicken, like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, being plucked. We want to see other chickens roasted at the altar of the people.

We want to see the new Assembly of the Iraqi people draft a constitution that safeguards the rule of the people from aspiring despots. We want to see an Arab government that has protection from a schizophrenic army General, who may wake up one day and decide to lead four tanks to the Presidential palace and take it over. Such stories only happened in the Middle East.

The last century witnessed the emergence of all these chicken-led Banana Republics in the Middle East. The next century will witness the demise of all these false states where the Arab body will mend back into its natural oneness.

But it has to mend locally first and then regionally.

Democracy has to be built on real dialogue and participation. The 275 elected members of the new Iraqi Assembly will have to draft a constitution and make it a living document. They are to conduct general elections shaping the final form of government by December 15, 2005.

The founders of America drafted a Constitution. They had it ratified by as many assemblies of the people as practically possible, at the time. This transformed the document from ink on parchment to a living organism in the bonds and relationships between Americans.

In recent times, however, the ink on parchment had become more revered than the bonds and relationships. America is looking for its own heart in Iraq. Fallujah could well be neighboring Highland Park. The only difference is that Wayne County Sheriff has not called in the National Guards yet.

Legislative assemblies in America, such as City Councils and US Congress, do not pay attention to the spirit of the Constitution, when they draft laws. Most laws passed in America, these days, are based on domestic political squabbles rather than human fairness or a sense of justice.

They reflect the way of the jungle, and the organization of the Animal Kingdom, as a hierarchy of a predator society.

That's why I always say that charity starts at home and in one's own heart first.

But one never knows, sometimes democracy by the barrel of a gun, may well be the right medicine.

February 12, 2005

The Death of Capitalism

The heartthrob of Capitalism is the Interest Rate. It secures the interest of Capital from the unpredictable chase of the value of people's efforts.

Capital doesn't like risk or insecurity. It is always looking for fertile grounds to reap income out of mulling around and doing nothing. Capitalism today is not the same as the Free Market society called for by Adam Smith in 1776, in his book "Causes of the Wealth of Nations."

He had a scant belief in the idea of profit and free trade. His Free Market had an "invisible hand" which adjusted prices of goods up and down according to supply and demand. His society suffered a sudden heart attack and died in the stock market crash of 1929. His