

CHOOSING FRIENDS, RECOGNIZING ENEMIES

Key Note Address by Mordecai Briemberg

JOSEPH MAIRS MEMORIAL 2009

As you can see, I am not Barack Obama. I do not believe that the “better history” and the “greatness” of the US resides, as Obama proclaimed in his inauguration speech, with the Marines who fought and killed Vietnamese in the 1968 battle for Khe Sahn, part of America’s ghastly imperial war for control of Vietnam. And I do not come to *promise* change, like a modern priest scattering spare drops of “hope” on the parched faces of people, everywhere thirsting for a dramatic difference in the world.

Without a dramatic, qualitative change in this corrupt and destructive capitalist disorder, suffering humanity may not survive, and the mangled natural world will be left to reshape itself without us.

I do come to join with you in tribute to Joseph Mairs, for he symbolizes the effort of working people around the globe who, from generation to generation, through collective struggle, seek to bring to birth a new world of justice and peace.

In our collective struggle is our strength. And in that strength is our real hope.

The sweater I wear was woven in Bolivia, and the colours -- my son tells me -- are worn by Evo Morales, the first indigenous president of that country. Consider this: more than 500 years after Spanish imperial conquest and unimaginable massacres, the indigenous peoples of Bolivia have risen again to reclaim their rights. In that there is real hope.

This month marks the 50th year of the Cuban revolution. Consider this: African slaves were transported centuries ago to die in chains for the wealth of plantation owners on that Caribbean island. And centuries later the descendants of these slaves returned as proud and courageous Cuban soldiers to inflict a defeat on the South African military, playing a crucial role in the collapse of that racist regime. In that there is real hope.

But if in collective struggle we find our strength, in division by gender, by race, by nationality, we face our weakness. I want to speak about one of these weaknesses, and also about the hopeful signs that we are beginning to overcome it.

You will not have to guess my age when I tell you that in March 1960, as a 22 year old student in England, I experienced an event that remains vivid in my memory. The event was in South Africa, a place I had never visited, thousands of miles away. Yet the impact was life-long and profound.

On March 21, 1960, thousands of black African men, women and children, unarmed, gathered in Sharpeville township to protest the apartheid regime and its so-called “pass laws”, laws which

regulated where blacks could or could not walk, live, work. The government sent jet planes to fly low over the demonstrators to try and intimidate them into dispersing. It was unsuccessful. Then police, on foot and in armoured vehicles, opened fire, and continued to shoot even as people fled. Sixty-nine were murdered, including 10 children. Over 180 were wounded. This became forever known as the “Sharpeville Massacre”.

As a military manoeuvre it was a success. The protest was broken. As a political manoeuvre it was a disaster. For the “Sharpeville Massacre” was a turning point in people’s understanding of the inhumanity of the South African regime, and the barbarism with which it was determined to preserve its racist structures. I was one of millions, in countries far and wide, that was jolted, from the heart to the brain, to joining in solidarity with South Africans – black, brown and white – who were determined to struggle together til victory to end those structures and that regime. Thirty six years later, in 1996, Nelson Mandela as the first black president of South Africa, symbolically returned to Sharpeville to sign into law the new South African constitution.

Today, in the tiny territory of historic Palestine, in the tiniest and most densely populated part of this tiny territory, in a place called Gaza, the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians is its “Sharpeville”. I believe the “Gaza Massacre” will prove a turning point in global awareness of the barbarism with which Israel is determined to preserve its racist structures.

Many of you, with millions in countries far and wide, have been jolted from the heart to the brain, and will begin to join in solidarity with Palestinians and Jews who are determined to struggle together til victory to end those structures and that regime. The largest demonstrations ever from Madrid to London to Montreal to recognize in sorrow the humanity of the Palestinian people and to demand justice for them; the statement from a long-time Jewish supporter of Israel, the British Member of Parliament Sir Gerald Kaufman that his grandmother, who was shot in her bed by a Nazi soldier, did not die so that Israel could kill Palestinian grandmothers in their beds; the statements as never before from Canadian and international unions: these all are hopeful signs. As of course are the decisions of Bolivia and Venezuela to expel the Israeli ambassador from their countries. Venezuela also has made two large shipments of humanitarian supplies.

In the struggle against South African apartheid, those of us outside its boundaries used the tools of boycott of products, of sports teams, of university links; divestment in businesses that maintained their operations in South Africa; in sanctions against the government, including expulsion from the United Nations. And in the struggle against Israeli racism, we can use these same effective tools. The community council of Stockholm Sweden – because of much public campaigning – just decided not to award a \$7 billion contract to a French firm that has projects in the occupied West Bank settlements, and instead awarded the contract to another corporation not associated with violations of international humanitarian law.

Let me say a little more about Gaza and then return to my earlier comment about one of our weaknesses.

Was Gaza a “war”? Israel says so, our media repeat it.

Consider: F-16s. helicopter gunships, tanks, phosphorous mortar shells, depleted uranium weapons, new experimental weapons, over 4,000 dwellings destroyed, more than 50,000 people

homeless in emergency shelters, 20 mosques, 16 medical facilities, 31 police stations, 16 government buildings, 16 ambulances, 1,500 factories and shops, universities and schools – all destroyed. The Red Cross reports ambulance staff fired on and killed and others prevented from rescuing wounded. The UN reports its food transport was blown up even when they have provided all coordination and details to the Israeli military.

Last Saturday UN officials listed 1,203 Palestinians killed, 410 -- over one third -- were children; more than 5,000 seriously injured, almost all civilians -- including at least 1,709 children and at least 724 women.

The U.N. said that on a comparable population scale it was the equivalent of having 33,000 people dead or injured in New York, or 1.2 million killed or wounded in the United States as a whole.

Not a war, a slaughter; and this is a regime that slaughters and whose supporters celebrate that slaughter. The perpetrators of the slaughter are war criminals – not government officials, not military officers, not press secretaries. War criminals.

Was Israel “defending itself”? They say so, our media repeat it.

A neuro-ophthomologist researcher at MIT, one of America’s most prestigious universities published a short, factual article documenting the record of “ceasefires” and who “breaks” them. Her conclusion? “[T]he latest ceasefire ended when Israel first killed Palestinians”. Examining the longer preceding period, she writes: “[A] systematic pattern does exist: it is overwhelmingly Israel, not Palestine, that kills first following a lull. Indeed, it is virtually always Israel that kills first after a lull lasting more than a week.”

There is an even more important pattern, over decades and explicitly articulated in statements of key Israeli political and military figures. In its effort to seize control of all the land of historic Palestine and cleanse the territory of its Palestinian indigenous inhabitants, Israel has feared two situations and consistently initiated wars to try and forestall peace.

The first situation is when Palestinian organizations, like the PLO or like Hamas, say as both did that they will accept what the United Nations Assembly every year, for the last 40 years, has reaffirmed overwhelmingly -- only Israel and the US consistently voting against -- namely an agreement where Israel withdraws its military and settlers from all of the 20% of historic Palestine that it conquered in the war of 1967. That then would become the state of Palestine, and the 80% remaining would belong to the state of Israel.

The second situation that Israel responds to by initiating war is when it is worried that the Arab people in the Middle East no longer accept that Israel is the all-powerful bully who can beat them into submission whenever it wants.

Israel explicitly launched its latest massacre of Gaza because to try to regain what it calls its “deterrence power” after it suffered a defeat after invading Lebanon in 2006. [“Gaza is to Lebanon as a sitting of a second exam is to the first”] That invasion itself had been initiated to

quote-unquote “educate” Lebanese, specifically Hezbollah, that Israel is invincible and Arabs are nothing, mere dirt to be swept out by the Israeli broom.

So let me conclude with my reference to our weakness. What do I mean? One of our weaknesses has been that until recently we, who know that our strength and hope depends on the solidarity of working people around the world, have ourselves failed sufficiently to recognize that this solidarity must include Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims. That they too are an integral part of humanity. They are not a gang of thugs, terrorists, fanatics -- as our governments, and their media echo, have slandered them. They have declared a “war on terror”, manufactured a rhetoric to frighten us and divide us, so that governments have a free hand to wage wars that massacre our sisters and brothers.

Much needs to be said about the role of media in promoting wars and dividing us. And perhaps we will have occasion informally to discuss this. But let me give you an example you may not know. The BBC in England, beyond the pro-Israel bias of the reporting of the slaughter in Gaza, now has vetoed a proposal from the "Disasters Emergency Committee" for "urgently needed funds to help ease the desperate plight of people affected by the conflict in Gaza". The Disasters Emergency Committee includes the British Red Cross, CARE International UK, Christian Aid, Concern, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, Save the Children, and World Vision. This is the first time the BBC has refused to broadcast such a humanitarian appeal. The BBC excuse? They claim that by airing this appeal for donations, they would violate their policy of impartiality in an ongoing conflict. No comment needed.

Returning to focus on ourselves, and looking in the mirror. We must recognize that the threat comes not from our Arab, Palestinian, Muslim sisters and brothers; the danger resides in our governments, the media that echoes and the corporate powers that set the priorities.

To keep alive the memory of Joseph Mairs, let us be clear in choosing our allies and in identifying our enemies.

It is my privilege to be here, and I thank you for your invitation and for your attention.