

Correspondence

THE MEDIA AND THE MIDEAST 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 oft-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 Mideast 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 bandaid. As A. M. Soloway commented, the conflict with Israel is only a "symptom in a pervasive pattern of Arab unwillingness to accept any non-Arab or non-Moslemic minority in its midst."

The evidence of oppression wielded against non-Arab and Moslem minorities is well documented and mostly overlooked. Kurds and Assyrians in Iraq, Coptics in Egypt, Berbers in Algeria, Druze in Syria, non-Moslem blacks in the Sudan, and Christians in Jordan and Libya have a long history of political, economic, and physical hardship in their homelands. "Palestinians" lived in the squalor and filth of the West Bank and Gaza refugee camps under the rule of their gun-toting, finger-pointing brethren for nineteen years,

held captive in poverty as pawns in the inhuman political chess match against Jewish autonomy. The issue of Israel is magnified because the Israelis are the only independent people to have withstood the waves of aggression....

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."

To risk Israel's geographic lifelines in the vain hope of quenching a rising Moslem-inspired thirst is an ill-advised course of action....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.

J. Alan Rich

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 "Boniatto 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 Salcinas and Calzada. I saw Mario Chanes, 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

(Continued on page 26)

meetings that led to some disinvestment and prevented some new investment in South Africa by leading banks, the author believes that a focused attack on the economic well-being of the country, combined with significant internal pressure, could induce significant change in national policy. But he is sophisticated enough to realize that any country with South Africa's abundance of gold, antimony, chromium, diamonds, manganese, platinum, titanium, and vanadium is not going to be pushed around in the world market.

Ultimately, Rotberg comes down to a "package of incentives" rather than a "bundle of punishments." Does South Africa want uranium to fuel its Koeberg atomic reactors? Then the U.S. should ask for strict adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. With this sort of bargaining as a model, the U.S. "might be able to add its weight, at the right moment, to those within South Africa who are accelerating the progress of any evolutionary tendencies." A modest program of action, but hard facts seem to rule out any effective alternatives.

Will the new American administration want to push, cajole, or even nudge South Africa into these gradual steps toward political stability, economic advancement, and racial justice? "Suffer the Future" is an apt title 

CONTRIBUTORS

Edward J. Curtin, Jr., is a writer who lives in Stockbridge, Mass.

Kevin P. Morrissey, M.D., is Associate Professor of Clinical Surgery at Cornell University Medical College and Associate Attending Surgeon at the New York Hospital.

Newton Koltz is a writer and editor who lives in New York City.

John Romjue is a historian with the U.S. Army at Fort Monroe, Virginia.

Richard Armstrong, who has traveled widely in Africa and Latin America, is a freelance writer and funding consultant.

Briefly Noted

THE TONGUE-TIED AMERICAN by Paul Simon

(Continuum Books; 238 pp.; \$12.95)

What are the implications to our security and prosperity of the phenomenon of *The Tongue-Tied American*? Paul Simon, the author of this well-meaning exposé of our culture's woeful performance in the area of foreign languages, is a Democratic congressman from Illinois and chairman of the House Subcommittee on Select Education. He makes a strong case for increasing our foreign language skills at a time when national need dictates increasing exposure to the cultures of other lands. He documents the loss of jobs and business owing to our inability to deal with prospective customers in their own language. The days of "dollar dominance" are over, and Europeans resent the cultural arrogance that takes for granted English will be spoken at meetings held on their home territory.

The business blunders may make us look foolish and may lose us trade, but the gaffes that come about in international relations tend to be less amusing and far more ominous. National area specialists in the Executive branch cannot read the most important materials in the original, Simon charges. The same failure of language skills is manifested in our embassies and consulates all over the world, forcing personnel to rely too often on nationals who can speak English. —D.A.

UNSETTLING EUROPE by Jane Kramer

(Random House; xix + 217 pp.; \$8.95)

These essays, written between 1971 and 1979 for *The New Yorker*, skillfully reveal a Europe rarely exhibited in travel brochures, the press, on TV, or in such broad terms as "the Left, the Right, ... Social Democracy... the State... and Recovery." The book concentrates on families living in Europe whom Europe refuses to recognize.

Akbar Hassan, an Asian from Uganda who fled to London after Idi Amin slaughtered his business partner, lives in the predominately Pakistani and Asian Southall section of London. The fact that he has never regained the status and respect accorded him in Ugan-

da as "a big capitalist man" undermines the security he gets in his segregated community. Pedrag Illić, a Czech working in Sweden to complete a dream house in Czechoslovakia, worries about his wife adopting Swedish customs and values. Two of the families—the Ceechis of Italy and the Martins of France—are bitter about the mistreatment they receive in their "home" countries. The Communists, for whom Mr. Ceechi risked his life, have become a massive, impersonal, bureaucratized force. In his village, Catholic festivals generate much greater enthusiasm than the Communist party's annual "Internationale." The Martins, after patriotically defending the French colony of Algeria, are shunned by their French neighbors.

Kramer avoids "easy abstractions about uneasy or complicated facts of life." If one considers, as the author does, that there are ten million foreign workers in industrial Western Europe, this book suggests the possibility of large numbers of people for whom European life is little more than mere existence and little less than perpetual despair. —R.L.

Correspondence (from p. 4)

committing suicide by diving off the fourth floor. The same day in building two another Cuban did the same, crashing on the concrete patio.

Our prison, which Fidel emptied during Mariel, is rapidly filling up again. Castro, as of now, classifies every prisoner as a common prisoner. Common, political, and religious prisoners are all mixed....

Early this year Fidel Castro said that all those who wanted to leave Cuba could do so. Yet he still holds many prisoners whose only crime is to disagree with the regime's ideology....

I urge the president to bring the plight of close to a thousand long-term political and religious prisoners now being held at Combinado, Boniato, and other prisons to the attention of the international community.

The U.S. churches, the Congress, and the media were very helpful in calling attention to our situation while in Cuban prisons. I urge them to continue to focus the attention of the American people on the plight of these, our suffering brothers.

Walter Thomas White
Dallas, Texas