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# The MESA Debate: The Scholars, the Media, and the Middle East

*The Twentieth Anniversary Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America sponsored a debate entitled "The Scholars, the Media, and the Middle East" on 22 November 1986. The participants in the debate were, in order of presentation: Bernard Lewis, Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies, Emeritus, Princeton University; Edward W. Said, Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University; Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the New Republic; and Christopher Hitchens, Washington correspondent for the Nation. The chairman was Professor William H. McNeill, University of Chicago. The debate is presented in full below.\**

*Bernard Lewis:* During recent weeks, as interest has built up in this meeting, I have heard it referred to in terms of the Roman circus, the Spanish bullring, the American boxing ring, and, from one of my more imaginative colleagues, as the "shoot-out at the MESA corral." I do not think of my coming here this morning as that of a gladiator, a bullfighter, a gunfighter, or any other fighter, nor as a duel. I come as a scholar through an organization of professional scholars to discuss a serious matter which is of vital concern to all of us.

A case in point. I do not regard the serious matter which we are here to discuss as one of the many problems and conflicts which at present beset the Middle East—Iraq-Iran, the Arabs-Israel, fundamentalist-secularist, or the like. There are ample other fora in which these can be discussed and, *in sha allah*, solved. Perhaps more important, I think we all know that nothing

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\*This is not an official transcript.

which we say or do here this morning is going to have the slightest effect in the Middle East. We can change nothing. We can't even change each other's opinions. What we can and should discuss is ourselves, our own role, our own duty as scholars, our duty towards our discipline, towards our colleagues, towards our students, towards the media, and beyond the media, towards the general public. And that is something which concerns us directly and where what we discuss, what we decide, can and, indeed, should determine how we conduct ourselves in our profession and our vocation—our duty being to understand and to communicate what we have understood to others.

In principle, of course, this problem, this duty, would be the same whatever the third term might be in the sequence the scholar, the media, and the Middle East. In principle it could be the same whether we substitute the Far East or the Middle East, the Far West or the Middle West, or India, or any other part of the world. In principle. In fact, of course, we all know that it is different. And the Middle East, in particular, is different for two reasons which I may mention here. One is that it is *our* region, the one with which we are concerned, all of us professionally, many of us personally in a variety of ways. And another reason—I think it is in a way more important and also rather difficult—and that is that the Middle East as an area of study for scholars in the western world presents peculiar problems different from those of most other areas. It is different than a situation in which we study a part of our own society. That I think is self-evident. It is also different from a totally alien society, at least in its earlier history, its former civilization. The Middle East is not like India or China which dawned at a fairly late date on the Western horizon, and concerning which we have no important pre-judgments, no inherited tradition, or attitudes, or stereotypes; nor they of us. The connection between the western world—which for this purpose extends from California to the Soviet Union, inclusive—and the Islamic world go back to the very beginnings of Islam and have been shaped by a whole series of events, particularly by the see-saw conflict between the two worlds.

This similarity in some respects, difference in others, makes it tempting and dangerously easy to go astray. We are dealing with a society in many ways akin to our own, quite apart from the general humanity we all share; there are historical and cultural affinities, genuine affinities, between the Middle East and the western world, genuine affinities which can easily give rise to false analogies. A simple example: we may try to explain things to those who are not familiar with Islam by saying the Qur'an is the Muslim Bible, Friday is the Muslim sabbath. You must have heard these statements

often enough. Up to a certain level, at a rather superficial level of discourse, these statements are accurate and informative. But as soon as we pursue them a little further they become dangerously misleading. The Muslim approach to scripture is different from the Jewish or Christian approach to scripture, and you can satisfy yourself immediately by simply reversing the proposition: the Torah is the Jewish Qur'an, the Gospel is the Christian Qur'an. It doesn't make sense, does it?

In the same way, to take a more contemporary and more complex example, when we use such words as revolution, they may have a different resonance in Islamic society against the background of Islamic history and tradition than that which they have in the West. In the Western world, the associations of the term revolution are the major revolutions of modern history—the American, French, or Russian. In the Islamic world there is a quite different revolutionary tradition, nurtured on different structures and classics, alluding to different history. What matters: the evocative symbol is not the storming of the Bastille, but the battle of Karbala'. In order to understand, in order to seek to understand movements in another civilization, we must try to understand it in its own terms, in relation to its own history, to its own traditions, and its own inspirations.

The result of this situation is often that we resort on both sides to stereotypes, to stereotyped images and explanations. In the course of the centuries-long confrontation, traditional attitudes have evolved on both sides. Among western visitors to the Middle East, for many, many centuries now, two stereotypes have predominated: one political, that of arbitrary despotism; and the other, shall we say personal, that of unbridled sexual power. The one relating to the sultan's palace, and the other to the women's quarters of that palace. We have a whole series of descriptions presenting Middle Eastern government, Islamic government, Ottoman government—whatever we chose to call it—in terms of arbitrary, limitless, irresponsible autocracy. In the same way, western travellers loved to dwell in immense detail on what went on inside the harem, about which they certainly knew nothing. One can see them drooling visibly in their largely imaginary descriptions. From this kind of thing—you can call it bilateral—while Western travellers to the East speak of licentious men, Islamic travellers to the West usually speak of lascivious women. One wonders why, if this meeting of East and West is really a meeting of licentious men and loose women, they didn't get on better.

The answer to a stereotype is not, of course, a negative stereotype. And you do not refute the myth of unbridled autocracy by claiming that what existed was perfect democracy. You do not refute the myth of total

subjugation of women by insisting that women have rights far beyond those claimed by NOW.

What are we to do? I see that I have one minute left. What I shall offer are general principles of how I feel a scholar ought to behave. You will probably say, "Yes, that's apple pie." To which I would answer, "Maybe." But don't forget, we are living in a time when apple pie is under attack, when we are told that since perfect apple pie is impossible we should eat raw dough and crab apples. I don't share that opinion. I feel that such values as civility, trying to maintain a decent level of debate to cool rather than to heat passions, to persuade rather than to shout down an opponent are values worth preserving and ones which we as professional scholars in particular owe to the society which employs us.

*Edward Said:* There is, of course, a fairly wide spectrum of scholarly work that is being done on the Middle East: the MESA Convention program is evidence enough of this. Yet scholarly work in this as in all other fields is limited by contemporary social, political, and economic—that is, contextual—actualities. No scholar ever feels that his or her work is well known enough, and nearly every one of us believes that public tastes and what is easily accessible for those tastes miss the importance of a given area of knowledge. There is no abstract knowledge: all of it is situated relative to other scholarship, to the realities of distribution and circulation, to the social institutions, rhetorical traditions, and methodological procedures of the field, as well as to the political interests and the facts of power and dominance in a given society at given periods.

To speak about scholars, media, and the Middle East here and now is to speak first of the contemporary United States. And in the U.S. it is also to distinguish first between the mainstream print and broadcast media, and the fringe left- and right-wing press; second, it is to distinguish between scholarly work on the Middle East that effectively remains secluded within the various specialist publications, and those views and images of the Middle East in wide public circulation, where they are either confirmed, or refined and repudiated by scholarly experts.

Roughly speaking, there are a small handful of essential thematic clusters in today's media coverage of the Middle East.

- One. The pervasive presence of generally Middle Eastern, more particularly Arab and/or Islamic, terrorism, Arab or Islamic terrorist states and groups, as well as a "terrorist network" comprising Arab and Islamic groups and states backed by the

- Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua. "Terrorism" here is most often characterized as congenital, not as having any foundation in grievances, prior violence, or continuing conflicts.
- Two. The rise of Islamic and Muslim fundamentalism, usually but not always Shi'i, associated with such names as Khomeini, Qadhdhafi, Hizballah, as well as, to coin a phrase, "the return of Islam."
  - Three. The Middle East as a place whose violent and incomprehensible events are routinely referred back to a distant past full of "ancient" tribal, religious, or ethnic hatreds.
  - Four. The Middle East as a contested site in which "our" side is represented by the civilized and democratic West, the United States, and Israel. Sometimes Turkey is included here, most often not.
  - Five. The Middle East as the locale for the re-emergence of a virulent quasi-European (i.e. Nazi) type of anti-Semitism.
  - Six. The Middle East as the *fons et origo*, the hatching ground, of the gratuitous evils of the PLO. Yasir Arafat, whose poor media image is probably beyond repair, is the ranking figure in this cluster of motifs whose basic message is that, if they exist at all, the Palestinians are both marginal and entirely to blame for their misfortunes.

As it happens, these motifs coincide almost perfectly with current U.S. policy, and, as the superpower with by far the most interventionary force in the Middle East—in money, arms, and political influence—we can safely characterize the United States therefore as being abetted in its policies by its media. How far this situation contradicts the rhetorical proclamations of a free, non-propagandistic press I shall leave to your sense of charity. But that the picture of the contemporary—even the historical—Middle East is misrepresented tendentiously I shall not leave to your charity: I shall say it myself. It is a deeply flawed, deeply antagonistic, deeply uninformed and uninforming view that regulates what is covered and what is not covered. But to a considerable degree it has worked—and this is the shameful part—because of the active collaboration of a whole cadre of scholars, experts, and abettors drawn from the ranks of the orientalist and special interest lobbies, among whom one, the Zionist lobby, has garnered a vastly disproportionate strength, given that Israel in the Middle East contains only four million inhabitants.

Thus, in every one of the six constellations I have identified there has been a major role played in formulating and affirming the circulation of this

reductive material by members of a profession, and its friends, who *do* know better, but who do what they do consciously to maintain American hostility towards the vast majority of the Middle East's people; encourage that hostility in its ideological fantasies; and hasten it towards less, rather than more knowledge, sympathy, and above all understanding. And, it must be added, there has been no significant scholarly deterrent or corrective to these views in the media; those experts and scholars who might have provided less distorted, more interesting views have either not come forward, or have not been chosen by the powers that be.

Some specifics are in order. As against the six clusters I mentioned, no sustained, meaningful, and undeterred exceptions to them are to be found in the pages of the following (and here I speak of news coverage and opinion): the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, *Commentary*, *Foreign Affairs*, the *American Scholar*, *Partisan Review*, *Policy Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Dissent*, the *New Criterion*, *Midstream*, *Tikkun*, *Moment*, and the *American Spectator*. CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS in essence work within the same paradigm. Most of the provincial papers, journals, and TV outlets depend on the mainstream majors to a large extent. As a test of my overall thesis, ask yourselves whether any of you can think of a media outlet whose guiding principles vis-à-vis Middle East coverage include the notions that Islam is never to be criticized; that the PLO, while prone to a few excesses, is basically democratic and loveable; that one or another Middle East state besides Israel is worthy of unrestricted U.S. aid; and that Christianity and Judaism are basically violent, hypocritical, and depraved religions. No such publication exists, whereas in fact all the ones I've mentioned give unexamined support to precisely the *opposite* views.

And why not, you may well ask. For, after all, the media can call on a substantial roster of experts who regularly represent the Middle East *for* the U.S. media and U.S. policy. Note—and here it's must be dotted—that this roster virtually—but not completely—excludes Muslims and Arabs—although many are available; it includes people whose political sympathies are clearly inscribed in what they write, although—and this is the pity of it—some of the scholars persist in characterizing what they do as impartial, or detached, or expert. This is the point, and it raises to me the profoundly interesting question of how these scholars continue to practise their art while remaining hostile, or at least antithetical to and substantially reserved, about its central object: the religion and culture of Islam. The roster I have in mind is responsible for what is essentially the entire gamut of media representation of the Middle East. It includes: Bernard Lewis, Elie



Kedourie, Walter Laqueur, Ernest Gellner, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Martin Peretz, Norman Podhoretz, J. B. Kelley, Daniel Pipes—I could go on.

I could supply you with a list of people who either could do a better or more informed job, or whose efforts to do the job have been systematically rebuffed. The U.S. media is, I would say, much more predisposed to hearing Bernard Lewis explain the TWA hijacking by a long, abstract, general account of Shi'i history until the Middle Ages, than in hearing about the widespread, ongoing debate between nationalists and supporters of Islamic tendencies, or between various factions within the Islamic tendency itself. The media is prone to welcome, I would say it is primed for, Gellner's theses that Muslims are a nuisance and viscerally anti-Semitic, that their culture and politics can be discussed in thousands of words without a single reference to people, periods, or events. The media is far less interested in discovering whether there is a significant correlation between assertions about Islam based exclusively on classical texts on the one hand, and on the other what Muslims in various countries, belonging to various classes, different genders, in differing social systems, actually do. Never are polls conducted by Arabs and Muslims cited; never are the old clichés that Islam is a political religion and that there is no distinction between Islam and Islamic life, ever violated by history, reality, events, people, or production.

Obfuscation is one thing; active insinuation quite another. Why do learned orientalists lend their authority to a symposium on terrorism edited by the Israeli UN ambassador if not as orientalists in order to *connect* Islam directly with terror? And why, out of all the prodigiously complex, even painful, realities in the 150-million-strong Arab Islamic world and its history, do classical orientalists find only Islam's poor knowledge of Europe and its anti-Semitism to discuss? Why are poetry, plays, novels, novellas, and essays never discussed? What has Islam become but a crudely and indiscriminately represented bogeyman, certified by the orientalists?

Aside from the fact that expert scholarship of this kind now in full view of readers of the *New York Review of Books*, the *Times*, and *Commentary* has no counterweight to oppose it, it is on its merits a disgrace to the world of intellectual production in the social sciences or humanities generally. Why is it that no prominent Africanist, Sinologist, Indologist, or Japanologist speaks in this patronizing and deflating manner?

The answer, to conclude, is that scholarly expertise on the Middle East has paid a very high price for its entry into the mainstream media and the halls of policy. It has sacrificed information on what goes on in the Middle East—Israel included—almost completely. It has sacrificed understanding and compassion totally.



*Leon Wieseltier:* For my sins as a scholar, probably, I've been forced to live among journalists for the past four or five years of my life. So it is largely about journalists that I wish to speak. I begin my remarks by saying that it is beyond any doubt that there is a disgraceful and almost systematically distorting image of Islam presented in the American media. More often the distortions are about Islamic culture and religion and society than of Islamic politics, and such distinctions must be made. Sometimes these distortions are anti-Muslim; sometimes they are not. One does not have to be anti-Muslim to be anti-Qadhdhafi or anti-Khomeini, though I'm sure it helps. Just last week, more evidence of this distortion was given as Washington assumed as its conventional wisdom concerning Mr. McFarlane's mission to Iran that there are no moderates in Iran, that it was almost a definitional matter that anyone who lived within the borders of Khomeini's Iran was crazy. About this I have no argument. There are, however, a number of complicating and, I think, important points or qualifications that I would like to introduce into the discussion for the purpose of arriving at two rather broad and coarsely stated conclusions.

The first is that some of this almost insurmountable ignorance about the Islamic way of life is owed not to any particularly anti-Muslim prejudice, but to the almost insurmountable ignorance of the American media about everything foreign to the United States. The intellectual shallowness of journalists needs no documentation by me. A system of foreign policy reporting according to which a man who has spent five years in Warsaw must land in Beirut on Tuesday and be an expert about it is well known to all of you. The lack of linguistic competence doesn't help, though in the case of a man like Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* who does know and speak Arabic, it shows quite clearly what difference the language makes. The coverage of India, of China, of Africa in the American media is just as disgracefully ignorant as the coverage of the Middle East.

Second point. The coverage of Israel, of the Jewish point of view, call it what you will, of Judaism certainly, and indeed of the American way of life—the distortions contained within that coverage in the Arab press are no less spectacular than some of the distortions that are contained in the western press about the Islamic way of life. Are those distortions anti-semitic? Sometimes they are. But sometimes they are not. Indeed, the interesting thing about them to my mind is not whether or not they are anti-Semitic, but the extent to which they point to the more common difficulty of the interpretation of one culture by another culture across vast cultural differences.

Three. There is a very delicate question of stereotypes about which I have time only to speak crudely. Stereotypes are the sort of lie that succeeds precisely because there is always a grain of truth in them. And I include the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the Jew in that generalization. For example, there has emerged since the revolution, since Khomeini's revolution in Iran, the famous and fabulous stereotype of the Muslim fundamentalist. Now, it seems obvious that Muslim fundamentalism is, of course, exaggeration based on ignorance of a very complicated phenomenon. It is obvious that the full intellectual, theological, cultural, political, and social meanings and machinery of the Iranian revolution have not been understood in this country; and yet, the stereotype of the raving or radical Iranian Shi'i fundamentalist student or the stereotype that we created by a kind of collusion between those students themselves and their leaders and the Western media—many of the events that led to the worst American prejudices were staged for the purpose of reaching American living rooms.

Four. There are biases in the coverage of Israel, too. I will try to deal with them quickly, and no doubt we will discuss them some more. First, the war in Lebanon in my view was a wrong war and, in some ways, a disastrous and disgraceful war. But the villifications of Israel that appeared in the American press during that war were as egregious a violation of journalistic principle and intellectual honesty as I have seen. Second, on the question of the West Bank, it is the common prejudice of the American media that Israel should vacate all or most of the West Bank as soon as it can. This is a prejudice that I happen to share. It is a prejudice that I am sure most of you happen to share. For that reason, it is a prejudice that we do not find particularly offensive. But it is, nonetheless, a prejudice. Third, the matter of the coverage of the Palestinians. This is a rather complicated question. But one thing seems clear to me on this simply in reading the American media. That is, that the notion that the Palestinian people, by this late date, by November 1986, have been erased or made invisible seems to me perfectly ridiculous. Which intelligent leader of the American media does not know that the Palestinians are a stateless people, that they were occupied in 1967, that they live under occupation, that they have lived for generations in camps and shanty towns, that they are as unwelcome in the Arab world—indeed, probably more unwelcome in the Arab world—than in the Jewish world, that a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict probably depends upon a solution of the Palestinian problem, and so on. All this seems to me not only [not] unknown, but to have reached the status of cliché.

My final two coarsely stated conclusions. (I think they're rather exquisite.) First, I think that the time has come to consider the limitations of media criticism and criticism of the press as a primary form of political discourse for the following reasons. One: the criticism of the press, by now, at least has the effect merely of reproducing and intensifying the very problem of bias that it deplors. Each of us has our own favorite sinners. My friends can point to Jonathan Randall; my enemies speak of other correspondents. I'm not sure there's anything to be gained by this except the simplification of the entire field into a cast of monsters versus heroes. Second: the obsessive criticism of the media flatters the very media it denounces by attributing much too much power to it. It seems to me that despite all the biases in the coverage of the Middle East, it is still possible for an intelligent man or woman to see the story within the story. There are events that happen even if reporters fail to cover them. There are events the truth of which can be seen even if reporters miscover them. We are not all mindless puppets of the networks, of the large newspapers, of the media conglomerates. It is possible to read newspapers critically, to watch television broadcasts critically, and to evaluate critically what we have as the evidence of our own eyes.

Final point, and this is the question of objectivity. Let me start this way. Objectivity may seem like an antiquated, bourgeois notion serving really to disguise all kinds of political, institutional, and cultural interests. That indeed may be the case. But it seems to me that there is a basic philosophical and methodological decision that one must make. And that decision is whether or not the truth is available, whether or not there is something that may be called the truth about which honest men and women may disagree, about which they may dispute by pointing to evidence and adducing proofs and fighting over texts and over phenomena of history that require difficult interpretation. And not even the all-invasive, all-intrusive media, in my view, have succeeded in destroying the notion of the truth of a situation.

Finally, press criticism, media criticism, in the Jewish case, in the Palestinian case, and other cases seems to me sometimes to be not just a contribution to the discussion, to intellectual discourse or political criticism, but a crutch that begins even to hobble action. If the Jewish case in the United States is heard, if the Jewish case is understood better here than in the other cases, it is not because the Jews came to a country that was distinguished by any native or essential hospitality to Jews or Judaism. The anti-Semitism and the prejudice and the hostility the Jews faced in this country when they arrived was certainly as great as any anti-Muslim feeling

that exists now. But what the Jews did was, they organized intellectually and politically. They founded institutions such as the Anti-Defamation League and they proceeded to see to it that their case would be heard. I think it is probably fair to say that it was a milestone in the history of Palestinian representation in this country when an organization such as the Arab Anti-Defamation League [sic] was founded, quite obviously and quite correctly on a Jewish model. The Jews knew that the world would not understand them properly. But when the Jews were in trouble, they did not wait for the world to understand them properly; they acted to save themselves. I think for vulnerable people, for minorities, the people who live in wretchedness, the important point finally—and to me this was Zionism's great lesson—is that what is really important is not that the world understand you: what is really important is that you understand yourself and that you save yourself. Thank you.

*Christopher Hitchens:* As a transplanted English radical, I come before you today with the queasy sensation of having been outdone in point of English joviality and emollience by Professor Lewis and outpointed in matter of radical style, irony, and passion by Professor Said. I stand before you, therefore, somewhat naked, and propose to begin with what I hope will be the day's only uncontroversial remark, which is that no thoughtful person, I imagine, in this audience, with any special knowledge of any subject or any area in the Middle East will be satisfied with the way in which that subject is discussed in print, whether in the general press or in learned journals. My own small area of expertise in the matter, which is the island of Cyprus, I find vindicates this self-pitying proposition. Most coverage and discussion of it is at least three of the following things: totally ahistorical, lacking any historical perspective; a very slight but perceptible reverence towards whatever the current official or administration thinking might be; and a wistful, elusive feeling that truth lies somewhere between any two propositions that may recently have been taken on it. Concerning the Middle East, I want to argue, and specifically the conflict over Palestine, a subjectively even-handed treatment, inadequate as it is, is very often abandoned and sometimes suspended completely.

Now, any examples I might select would, *ipso facto*, be selective, even if I had three times ten minutes in which to speak. But the following selections, taken, naturally, *from* context as all quotation selection is, trying to anticipate that criticism, seem to me to be emblematic rather than to be anecdotal. I have chosen them less for journalism *per se* than from

that bloody crossroads where journalism and scholarship and we today are met.

First, the book by Joan Peters called *From Time Immemorial*, an attempt to show that there was no such thing even as a Palestinian problem; that there was no such thing as a Palestinian people. Its reception in this country ranged from the respectful to the moist and the adoring, and came from all corners of the academy and the press. It isn't so much important, and I haven't the time, to stress the massive evidence that has since accumulated that the book was a mere concoction, as it is to underline the extraordinary difficulty that that evidence had in finding its way to print. Only after extensive ridicule of the book in the Israeli and English presses in particular, were any mild reconsiderations published in this country, in which it was interesting to see a number of people fall on both sides at once. But too late.

Second, the book *The Fateful Triangle* by Professor Noam Chomsky. I don't want to pay Professor Chomsky any unintentional compliments, because I think he deserves far better, but it's correct to say that his book on the Lebanon war was, at its time of publication, unrivaled. That is to say it had no competitor. There was no other book about the engagement of the United States and its Israeli ally in the Lebanon war. And the book was published over the uniquely timely intersection of the events of that war at the vote. Long, very densely and highly footnoted, written by one of the few American Jews with an international scholarly reputation. What was its fate? It was unreviewed by the *New York Times*; it was unreviewed by the *Washington Post*; it was unreviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*; by the *New Republic*; by my own magazine, *The Nation*; by *Commentary*; and by all the magazines on the list that even Edward, with his speed and dash of delivery, didn't have time to complete reading. A no less than scandalous, I dare to say, scandalous, state of affairs.

Third. "Flashpoint," a public broadcasting package with three films intended for screening last April on the question of Palestine. The three films broke up, as such packages of three often do, into two pro-Israeli segments and one made by an anti-Zionist Jew. Public broadcasting stations in the cities of New York and Washington, D.C., among others declined to screen the pro-Palestinian third of the capsule. The *New York Times*, the journal of record of the *bien pensant* and the only journal of record for the beknighted greater New York City area, reviewed the film that was not screened and said it was—and I'm quoting—"not far from the films produced by the Third Reich."

Now, I work in a cynical profession and I've set my colleagues the following puzzle. This is all you know; you have to say what the topic is.

PBS film is banned from the screens of New York. The *New York Times* does not comment on the banning but describes the unseen film as Nazi. My question to my colleagues is, what was the film about and what view did it take? Not even the most conservative of my friends and colleagues has failed to guess the answer without hesitation. I find this cynicism gives me very little pleasure. I find it unattractive. So is the knowledge that is widely disseminated and internalized in my profession that if a critic of Israel dares to make these sort of points he will face either the repellent allegation that he is anti-Semitic if he's a Gentile, or that he is a victim of Jewish self-hatred, if, as so often, he is a Jew. This latter day version of Morgan's fork with its blackmailing and authoritarian implications is present in the minds of every journalist that I know. And it's agreed with varying degrees of resignation that whereas life is indeed unfair, the three examples I cited above could not occur so flagrantly in a debate on any other question.

Let me suggest two reasons I think this might be so. And I'll give you another quotation. It is the following. You have to guess where it comes from. Put simply it says, "American journalists are interested only in two topics in the Middle East: Israel and the United States. Whatever takes place that is related to these countries is amplified and broadcast to the world. Whatever is not is virtually ignored." That is from "The Media and the Middle East" by Daniel Pipes in *Commentary*, in the bizarre context of an argument that the entire United States press is ranged against the Israeli case—one of the unintended ironies, of other unintended ironies, which all of those readers of Dr. Pipes have long learned to cherish.

Second, more vulgar, but less escapable—simple racism. Where did the following appear? The description of a play at the American Repertory Theater in this town: "The universalist prejudice of our culture prepared us for this play's Arab, a crazed Arab to be sure, but crazed in the distinctive ways of his culture. He is intoxicated by language, cannot discern between fantasy and reality, abhors compromise, always blames others for his predicament and, in the end, lances the painful boil of his frustrations in a pointless, though momentarily gratifying, act of bloodlust." That is a signed comment by the owner and editor of the *New Republic*. I disagree with you, Leon; I'm sorry, I don't believe that could appear about an Indian or an African in any other magazine in this country. As to whether it should be said at all of any ethnic or racial group in a magazine that, once, boasted Walter Lippman and Edmund Wilson, "is a question for those who toil in that vineyard."

We would be open to the charge of self-pity if we located this problem just in the workings of the media or the academy. The two are caught—and



I realize I'm going to have to save some of this for my rebuttal—naturally, between a state policy which favors Israel for opportunistic reasons (a simple administration decision on which is the right course), and a public opinion with a vulgar prejudice against the swarthier type of Middle Easterner. The second can be seen in almost any kind of contemporary cartoon, not exempting those by the liberal *bien pensant*, such as Herblock of the *Washington Post*, where the unpardonable dual stereotype shows Arabs and Iranians as the most malodorous and subversive desperadoes, again exactly mirroring the fork on which European anti-Semites used to attempt to impale the Jews. Exactly mirroring and duplicating that fork.

And the former is evidenced by coverage which naturally annexes Israeli terminology, to be more precise, the terminology of the Israeli right. I will return.

*Chairman:* It is time now for the second round or the rebuttal, or the continuation of remarks.

*Lewis:* First, a brief word on the remarks made by our two representatives of the media. Yes, of course, it is very easy to find examples of prejudice directed against all parties in the Middle East, and this does not prove that the media as a whole are biased one way or the other, merely that the media's idea of impartiality is to balance opposing prejudices. And this, of course, is understandable, on television in particular. It makes a much better television than presenting a balanced and reasoned point of view. And we have just seen in the elections which have taken place in this country—where the discussion is not of remote places and foreign people, but of immediate domestic issues—how difficult it is (and most would say impossible) to arrive at any serious or balanced discussion in the circumstances of television and to a lesser extent in the other media.

It is a real difficulty, and we will all naturally concentrate on those passages which are offensive to us, in a sort of masochism of the reader, which is universal. I don't think it can be assigned to any particular direction. Ignorance is of universal implication.

When I was cut off by the chairman, I was about to say one or two things about the duties of the scholar as I perceive them. Professor Said very obligingly exemplified some of the points I was going to make, one way or the other. The apple pie I was about to offer you, shall we say truth and objectivity, are much misunderstood words, and perhaps are not appropriate at the present time. Obviously, we all have our allegiances, we all have our



prejudices, we all have our opinions and in a free society we are all entitled to advance them.

What then are we to do? If for truth and objectivity we substitute honesty and fairness, I think we are talking in more practical rather than theoretical terms and enunciating something which we can all understand. For example, it is hardly either honest or fair to try to refute someone else's point of view not in terms of what he says, but of motives which you choose to attribute to him in order to make your refutation easier. It is hardly an example of truth or fairness to use the smear tactics that became well known in this country at an earlier stage, by lumping together writers, scholars, and journals of very disparate characters and origins, and thereby conveying rather than asserting that they are all the same, that they constitute one homogeneous, centrally-directed, conspiratorial whole.

Much of what was said about the media I would agree with, but how far beyond the media shall we pursue it? I do not recall any scholar arguing that terrorism in the Middle East is congenital. I would be very surprised if any such thing could be said. Nor that terrorism is inherently Islamic. In the colloquium which was quoted, the point which I made—and anyone who is interested can check it quite easily in the printed version—was that, to say that terrorism is Islamic, is an absurdity in the sense that Islam is a religion like other religions with an ethical and moral standard, and is opposed to terrorism as such. The only way in which that expression has meaning is in the rather more political character, of Islam, particularly at the present time. At the present moment almost all political movements tend to acquire a political character, and terrorism is, after all, a political movement.

*Said:* I felt that in the first part of the discussion there was broad agreement that there is distortion, that the media does x, y, and z, and so forth, and that as scholars we should be doing other things. Given the constraints of time, I talked about a group or a number of scholars and journalists, intellectuals and journals and newspapers. And I would be perfectly happy to take the point case by case and to show—not that they were all directed by some outside source, far from it—that there is a set of motifs that keeps turning up in the media. The six that I mentioned I'm not going to repeat. But I felt that the scholars who knew more about the Middle East—and I guess I agree with all my colleagues on this panel—that it is the duty of scholars to act in the interest of truth and justice and fairness and honesty. I felt that there wasn't enough of a deterrent to this essentially mischievous misrepresentation of the Middle East, and that, in some cases, far from

preventing the distortions from getting greater, they were actively assisting in a sense of participating or collaborating within this framework to make it worse. And the examples I gave seem to me bear it out. For example, Professor Lewis mentions the symposium on terrorism. In the introduction of the book, Ambassador Netanyahu says that the two central sources today in the world of terrorism are the Islamic world, Islam, and the KGB. And then framed by this discussion we have only three representatives from the scholarly discussion of the Middle East who essentially say, Professor Lewis says, if I may quote him here more or less verbatim, "it's foolish to say that Islam is a religion that promotes terrorism. It's a great religion like Judaism," and so forth, but then he goes on to say in the next paragraph that it is correct to use Islam as a designation for terrorism in the modern world.

Now, there's also the context of the book, the context of public discussion in which it is left to no one's imagination that Islam produces terrorism. I think the insinuation there is quite clear. I don't think it's the case that in talking about Islam today we have experts trying to promote understanding, not only of the diversity of Islam, of the Islamic world—and I speak now as a person who is interested in learning more about it rather than less. It's not a question of promoting it, but rather of concentrating on a few simple points: that Islam is essentially political. What in this context does the word political mean? It could mean anything. But it does seem to suggest that, mostly, Muslims are running around making political points and doing nothing else—you know, that they might live, and produce and die and write and think and feel.

It reminds me of a story by Groucho Marx, one of my favorite Groucho Marx stories. He's coming down in the elevator in a hotel in Italy and a group of priests come in the elevator. One of them turns to him and says, "Oh, Mr. Marx, you know my mother is really an admirer of your films." So Groucho turns to him and says, "Hey, I didn't know you guys were allowed to have mothers."

That's number one. And the other point which needs to be made in this context is the suppression of information that might show the Middle East as a rather more complex place than writings of this sort generally allow. So if you're going to talk about Islamic terrorism, what about in the same context talking about Jewish terrorism, or Christian terrorism? For example, if you want to show that there's anti-Semitism in the Arab world—I'm sure there is; there's anti-Semitism everywhere—one has to make distinctions between quotations from a newspaper, trends, public policy, beliefs, and ethnic characterizations. All of these things are lumped together and

produced in a series called anti-Semitism in the Arab world, or the Arab and Islamic world. So that's one problem, the question of distortion.

Then the other problem, and this is the last point I want to make, is the constant protestation that what we are doing is scholarly and objective. I'm all in favor of these things. But I would think we have to allow that the public is rather more intelligent than that. Protestations are not enough. One has to demonstrate these things by fairness, by a wide scope, by quoting the whole context, not just part of it, and stop pretending that what we are about is only scholarship. In fact, as I'm sure everyone here knows, we are dealing with extensions of a conflict that occur and the protection of the guild; that is, the ritual protestation of formulae about one thing or the other are not going to dispel the truth. The truth is there as Leon quite correctly said, and one can perceive it. That one point of view is essentially much more represented than another, nobody in this room would deny. That's the point that had to be made.

*Wieselstier*: I'll comment on a few of the things that were said here, and my comments may, with any luck, add up to a coherent argument. It seems to me that Edward Said has drawn a caricature; that he has taken extremes of Jewish and Israeli opinion, put them together, and come up with some alleged mainstream position which characterizes the Jewish state, mainstream Jewish institutions, the American Jewish community, the American Jewish press, and the American non-Jewish media. Who, for example, or where in any of those institutions is the equation of Palestinians with Nazis made? The equation is made in many disgusting quarters of the Jewish community. It is made by many Likud front groups. It is made by a group called Americans for a Safe Israel. It is encouraged by Sephardi demagogic politicians and Ashkenazi demagogic politicians in Israel. But where in the mainstream Jewish community, within the Labor party, within much of the Likud party, within the American Jewish community, is that particular or any of the other repulsive ideas that he cited, where exactly are they to be found?

I will not stick Edward Said with Abu Nidal. I would prefer not to be stuck with Meir Kahane. Each of us have our big problems. But the fact remains that both of us are doing our best to solve these problems, and we are not alone in our communities.

On the question of Jewish terrorism, one of the reasons that Jewish terrorism is written about less frequently than Palestinian terrorism is because until quite recently, that is to say from the period of the 1930s and

1940s until sometime in the late 1970s, Jewish terrorism occurred less frequently than Palestinian terrorism. And that is simply the historical fact.

On the other hand, with the outbreak of Jewish terrorism in Israel and on the West Bank, there have been many people, as Edward Said knows quite well, who have been screaming loudly and hoarsely in condemnation and denunciation and acting politically both to bring those people to justice and to destroy not only the political and physical infrastructure that made those acts possible, but to destroy the intellectual foundation of that kind of extremism.

And I refer to people here, not merely to Noam Chomsky, with whom one may be permitted to disagree without being accused of being a self-loving Jew, I hope. I refer to a great many intellectuals who may disagree with Chomsky and Shahak and Izzy Stone and all kinds of people on all kinds of questions, but I think who are decent people, who are not racists about Arabs, Muslims, or Palestinians.

With my friend Hitchens I will not try to compete in wit, nor in dishonesty. Hitchens and I are close friends, we can say anything we want about each other.

The Joan Peters' book was a shabby performance by an ignorant woman. The Joan Peters' book should have been refuted in my magazine, in other magazines; it was not. It was not because I had not read the book before I assigned it. On the other hand, within the Jewish community and outside the Jewish community, the Joan Peters' book had no impact whatsoever for several reasons. One: because most American Jews are not terribly interested by what happens exactly inside Israel. Two: because it was a very fat book. Three: because I believe most American Jews are no longer hospitable to the political conclusion that the Joan Peters' book begs, which is that there are no such things as Palestinians. That was the upshot of that book, and my view—it may be optimistic, but I speak here from some knowledge and experience—is that it is simply no longer the commonly held view in the Jewish community.

The notion that anybody who disagrees with Israeli policy is either routinely called anti-Semitic by I don't know who—the American media, the American Jewish media, the Jewishly controlled media—the notion that all such critics are routinely called anti-Semitic is simply ridiculous. There has been a very bitter debate going on inside the Jewish community ever since Israeli troops captured the West Bank in 1967, a debate at least as bitter, if not more so, than the debate that goes on between the Jewish community and the Palestinian community, more bitter in a way because internecine debate, fraternal struggles, are always more bitter.

I reject the notion that all Israel's critics are anti-Semitic. Some of them are, and they should not be allowed to hide behind the inelegance of calling them that. Most of them obviously are not. My view is simply that they are wrong.

*Hitchens:* I want to speak directly to two points made by Professor Lewis in his second appearance at the microphone. First, his dismissal of the idea that there is any pattern in the misrepresentation that Edward Said and myself have mapped and sketched as much as we dare. And second, as he put it, that there's nothing congenital [about terrorism]. He says he knows of no one who says that the propensity to terrorism is congenital, no scholar, that is. Let me give the quotation, "The root cause of terrorism lies, not in grievances, but in a disposition towards unbridled violence." Would that meet your criteria of congenitality?

Well, that's in the introduction to *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* by Benjamin Netanyahu, whom you may say is no scholar, and I would be compelled to agree with you. What he is—apart from being Israeli ambassador to the United Nations and a leading member of the hard right—all he is at the moment is a convener of scholars. His institute, the Jonathan Institute, is a recognized resource for a vast network of academic and journalistic outlets. It's routinely quoted as a source of expertise on terrorism on the news. And I think I'm being videoed by the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, which produced a book, *Hydra of Carnage*, a depiction of terrorism that's entirely based on the findings of the Jonathan Institute. I don't mind debating with Benjamin Netanyahu, that is to say. What I do mind is that when I come to a seminar, I find that he's the moderator of it. I would say *mutandis mutandis* that the words terrorist, rejectionist, extremist, and fundamentalist have come to mean over a vast sway of discourse what Israeli conservatives understand them to mean. I say that that is a pattern; it is not a mere coincidence and not something that can be laughed off. It is a signal triumph of unassimilated, undigested propaganda. And it finds its triumph in the acceptance of Benjamin Netanyahu and in the emergence of terrorism as a discipline, a subject in its own right, with chairs and course codes. Now I think we may find certain root cause theories of terrorism to be simplistic and unpersuasive and propagandistic also. But I think that Ambassador Netanyahu's finding on page 204 of his book that, "the root cause of terrorism is terrorists" is open to objection on both journalistic and scholarly grounds as well as on aesthetic and grammatical ones.

The job of independent journals and the academy is not to reflect bigotry in public opinion, or to cater through special institutes and seminars to the pressures of *raison d'état*. Least of all is it to collude with the propagandistic and self-serving views of the world. Thank you.