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**Roy Meachum**

## Matter of conscience



It seems at times that modern Americans are capable of great moral fervor. Our ancestors' passionate campaigns against slavery and demon rum are matched by today's crusades aimed at apartheid, the Bomb and Nicaragua's contra rebels.

Vestiges of 19th century jingoism lingers on with those who consider the contras as "freedom fighters." Not all our fellow citizens have lost the taste for wrapping themselves in the flag, I am happy to report.

My soul is encouraged by any and all efforts that demand people find reason to set aside their petty struggle for self-aggrandizement. I find no fault with any excesses committed in the name of freedom of speech, except when these excesses attempt to enforce silence on opposing views. Intimidation is the first step along the road to democracy's death.

Former colleague Mary McGrory, writing in the *Washington Post*, cited "intimidation" as the cause for the unnatural silence that has gripped Capitol Hill on the continuing abuse, including murder, of Palestinians by the occupation army. Among presidential candidates, only Jesse Jackson has cried out for relief for those helpless in Gaza and on the West Bank.

As this election year progresses, the world can expect no better from this nation's politicians. Running for office demands tremendous funding. Federal matching money has provided no relief from the manipulations exercised by powerful lobbies.

Sen. Charles Percy's narrow defeat by Paul Simon in 1984 was justly claimed as a victory by a California man who poured over a million dollars into the race, because he disagreed with Sen. Percy's views on the Middle East. The same man posed a similar threat to Sen. Charles McC. Mathias, and for the same reason. Frederick's member of the U.S. Senate may have decided not to run for various unrelated reasons. But Mr. Mathias was very much aware of the Californian's intentions to introduce his personal hatred, and apparently unlimited money, into the 1986 race. Here is the gag that Mary meant.

With our politicians silenced, the onus falls on journalists and ministers to speak for a people who cannot speak for

themselves. When leaders arise on the West Bank and in Gaza, they are quarantined, jailed and hustled into exile. The irony of the deportations must not be lost. Officials whose fathers frequently were born elsewhere are ordering from the land men and women whose families lived in Palestine for countless generations. As a result, the people's sole means of self-expression has become demonstrations, featuring rocks and fire bombs and burning tires.

Picking up any newspaper these days gives the illusion that the Gazans and West Bankers are being heard. Their wounding and dying in large numbers continue to "buy" them time on television news, but only on programs they cannot see. According to various reports, their struggle is "sanitized" for domestic consumption. Furthermore, foreign journalists have been subjected to increasing restrictions on their freedom to cover the story.

In addition, the occupying power has launched a propaganda drive, enlisting the services of its more fervid supporters, who specialize in distortion and personal attacks. Ms. McGrory's column, for example, prompted a reply that never touched its main thesis of political intimidation. Instead, her challenger offered defense of the occupation army's indefensible use of deadly force against the unarmed demonstrators.

In time, I have no doubt, Palestinian deaths, when they are reported, will

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wind up buried in newspapers' back

pages as they were before December's disturbances. In the previous month, without referring to research, I can recall the deaths of two 17-year-olds, a 14-year-old and a mother, killed while trying to get her children off the streets. In all, I remember reading that 104 Palestinians lost their lives in 1987's first 11 months at the hands of the occupation's security forces. The figure did not include families cut down in air raids upon Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

While I regret my profession's failure to make readers and viewers more aware of the continuing human casualties in the Middle East bloodletting, I have an understanding of the twin realities at play. Media are subject to the same attempted intimidation as politicians, and, maybe more important, most Americans simply couldn't care less about more dead Palestinians. There exists, outside Arab-American circles, no organized groups comparable to those who seek to increase public awareness on apartheid, the Bomb and Nicaragua. For this lack, I blame our clergy.

While some of the dead, wounded and exiled Palestinians are Christian, America's churches have not responded to their pleas for help. Our synagogue pulpits are similarly silent, even though the security force's actions reflect badly on Judaism. A respected rabbi described the occupying power as "a juvenile among nations," as if that could justify its sins against humanity. But one Protestant clergyman said to me: "Ministers cannot be controversial." And that latter observation, I am afraid, is the greater truth.

Modern religion seems to swing on the hinge of making people comfortable with themselves. With few exceptions, this is what our churches and synagogues have become in the last years of the 20th century. Conscience has been stilled in favor of rote and regulation, aimed at achieving union with a chosen God. In this light, the Palestinians are reduced to unwelcome distractions, no more. The fact that most are Muslims simply make them more easily rejected.

But the men, women and children in Gaza and on the West Bank are human beings. They cry. They bleed. Their pleas for help may be drowned out by singing hymns louder. But when the organs die, the men, women and children are still there, condemned in their camps.

As I quoted Anwar Sadat in my Nov. 19 column, honoring the 10th anniversary of his historic trip to Jerusalem, there can be no peace in the Middle East until justice comes for the Palestinians. Without peace in the Middle East, the world can know no rest.

Understanding this great reality of our times, no matter the silence that grips our leaders, political and spiritual, my own conscience will not permit me to forsake those human beings, for their own sake as well as the cause of world peace, in the name of my children and grandchildren.