

Guest commentary

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Arafat: A critical appreciation

The following guest commentary is by Ellis Boal, a lawyer in Hayes Township. As part of a 12-member delegation of the National Lawyers Guild, he met with Yasser Arafat in May 2002.

Commentators and politicians in the U.S. condemn Yasser Arafat as a terrorist, saying his death Nov. 11 releases the Palestinian people to make peace with Israel.



Boal

The Bush administration never endorsed the terrorism claim. And counterposed to it, Arafat has to his credit one massive achievement: the midwiving of the modern Palestinian national

movement.

Like Moses, he brought it to — but not into — the promised land.

History

The national movement had so little going for it at the start. Israel's history includes the initial conquest of 38 percent more land than the UN allotted to it in 1947, the expulsion of 700,000 Arab refugees in 1948, creation of 350,000 more refugees in 1967, the 1982 killings of 1,000-2,000 unarmed civilians in the Israeli-controlled refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, the 1985 Israeli attack on Arafat's compound in Tunisia, the movement of 430,000 settlers into conquered Palestinian land and the ongoing housing and other discrimination against the 1.2 million Israeli Arabs countenanced by Israeli law.

Few of the refugees have been repatriated.

When Arafat entered political life in the 1950s, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan had extinguished British Mandate Palestine. As an engineer in Kuwait in 1959, he and four oth-

er Palestinians founded Al Fatah. Its goal, and the PLO's, was to "create a democratic society in Palestine where Muslims, Christians and Jews would live together in complete equality."

In 1968 fighters directed by Arafat repelled the Israeli army from Fatah headquarters, in the celebrated battle of Karameh in Jordan. The feat captured the world's imagination. Representing the Palestinian people, he addressed the UN General Assembly in 1974.

Like Nelson Mandela, Arafat built the movement without armies. Like Mandela, he did it despite Israel's stupendous material superiority.

Unlike Mandela, he faced hostility and imprisonment from allied Arab governments. Unlike Mandela, he faced worldwide sympathy for Israel, a national survivor of the murderous holocaust. Unlike South Africa, Israel receives huge amounts of U.S. money and arms.

In the 1970s Arafat decided to give up the historic claim to all of British Mandate Palestine. Most Palestinians eventually agreed.

The 1993 Oslo accords provided for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. But the deal proved disastrous. Provocatively, in the years following, Israel doubled the settlers in Arab areas.

In work style, Arafat was an autocrat. Spare in his personal habits, he tolerated corruption in others.

Many Palestinians grew angry. Their government achieved neither sovereignty nor efficient administration. Radicalism grew in influence. After a settler killed 29 Islamic worshippers in 1994, Hamas began suicide bombing of civilians.

Arafat was elected Palestinian president in 1996.

He is criticized for rejecting an offer Israel made at Camp David in 2000. But the deal would have deprived Palestine of control of its borders, airspace and water. It would have divided Palestinian territory into four separate regions. It would have expanded Jewish settlements. Palestinian refugees' rights to return to their homes would not have been recognized.

This was not the withdrawal Israel agreed to at Oslo. The summit foundered. A new intifada began, directed against Israel and the Palestinian Authority both.

Prospects

What is the future? Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon will insist on keeping settlements, the separation wall, security buffers, roads only for Jews and land for future expansion. Fatah co-founder Mahmoud Abbas, the likely new Palestinian president, is a conservative but not a quivering. He will stick to the Palestinians' position at Camp David. Bloody tragedy lies ahead.

The important question is whether a Palestinian leadership rooted in the population under occupation can develop a new positive strategic initiative.

That it has any chance at all is due in large measure to the nation-building efforts of Yasser Arafat.

Have a viewpoint you wish to express? The News-Review welcomes Guest Commentaries for use on the Opinion Page. They must be personally written by the author and no more than 600 words.

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Leave a phone number where you can be reached during the day to verify the signature.

PAIR

11/24/04

Boal demonstrates courage in thinking

Editor:

In a part of the country that, judging by the recent election, is overwhelmingly Neocon, it was indeed a pleasure to read "Arafat, a critical appreciation" by Ellis Boal in your Friday, Nov. 19 issue!

Mr. Boal is an attorney, no doubt a good one, and, like a good attorney appears to approach an issue by clearing his mind of often misguided, popular opinion and look at the entire issue and the facts as they really exist!

Years ago, like Mr. Boal, I decided to find out just what this Palestine v. Israel controversy was really about. I began to read about the "Holocaust" which I most certainly do not deny occurred, the history of Jewish migration through the last 20 centuries and the plight of people of the Middle East during the dark years of Colonialism, many of its manifestations and ill feelings still existing today, and came out with an opinion totally in accord with Mr. Boal's!

I applaud him for his courage and ability to think out of the box defined by AIPAC and an ongoing and often misplaced orgy of sympathy toward only one side of the issue!

**Russ Strand
Charlevoix**

Yasser Arafat brought more violence, more bloodshed, more impasse to region

Editor:

Ellis Boal's commentary (Nov. 19, 2004) is both misguided and irresponsible. While Yasser Arafat may have been instrumental in the formation of the PLO and Al Fatah—two organizations whose tactics have been strongly criticized for their violence and absolute rigidity—these are hardly reasons to celebrate his life. It's true that Arafat brought recognition to the deplorable state of Palestinian refugees. But it's also true that his re-

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fusal to negotiate with Israel led to more violence, more bloodshed, and further impasses in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Mr. Boal's statistics may impress some readers, but I must point out that to compare Arafat to figures such as Moses and Nelson Mandela is itself a piece of rhetorical violence. Most readers will realize that comparisons only work when there is some degree of similarity between the two things being compared, and the truth is that Arafat was neither a Moses nor a Mandela. There is little evidence that Arafat ever made the personal sacrifices of Nelson Mandela, nor did he achieve his goal (which, of course, includes the destruction of the state of Israel) as Mandela did. And to compare him to a hero from the Old Testament is monumentally insensitive, if not deliberately inflammatory.

There may some day be peace in the Middle East. But that day will never come when people like Mr. Boal engage in polarizing rhetoric that celebrates violence over compromise, debate over dialogue, and hagiography over history. Please, Mr. Boal, take the blinders of Palestinian propaganda from your eyes and see Arafat for what he was: neither a saint nor a demon, but a man who could not compromise his own principles and self-interest, even for peace itself.

**Suzanne Rosenthal Shumway,
Michael A. Shumway, Gail Willens,
Harold Willens, Andrew Ellison, Karly Ellison,
Thomas Johnson, Jane K. Harris, Val Meyerson,
Lori A. Katzman, M.D., Ann B. Folb**

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ment and disagreement with Shumway et al, but will pass for now. Though their response is generally harsh I appreciate that they expressed themselves, and hope to have continuing dialog on this and other topics in the future.

A footnote: The News-Review's space limitation did not permit my appraisal of Arafat's demeanor when our delegation met with him in May 2002. Though charming he was unimpressive, not seeming to be the leader of anything much less a nation of millions in exile. Perhaps it was because English was not his first language, or maybe it was his health. We puzzled over it. I mention it only as a curiosity.

Ellis Boal
Hayes Township

Others compared Arafat

Editor:

Among other points in response to my November 19 op-ed "Arafat: A Critical Appreciation," readers Suzanne Shumway et al say my comparison of Yasser Arafat to Moses was insensitive if not inflammatory. Both led their people to the promised land but did not themselves enter it, I wrote.

The comparison is not originally mine. Other recent assessments of Arafat — one by Uri Avneri, three-time elected Knesset member and fighter for Israel in 1948, and another by Mahmoud Darwish, acclaimed Palestinian poet — used it.

Also, I am not seeing the larger point. Moses is revered in both Israel and the Arab world.

I have other areas of agree-