

# That will Be the Day

by Edward Said

When was the last time an Arab foreign minister on a visit to the US pointedly refused to address the Council of Foreign Relations in New York and Washington and requested instead to visit a major African-American church, university or meeting?

A FEW days ago the third United Nations official in charge of the oil for food programme in Iraq, Jutta Purghardt, resigned the job in protest, preceded in the same sense of outrage and futility by the two men who had filled the post before her, Dennis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, both of whom had also resigned.

So terrible are the results of the US-maintained sanctions against that country's civilian population and infrastructure that not even a seasoned international humanitarian official can tolerate the agony of what those sanctions have wrought. The toll in human life alone on a daily basis is too dreadful even to contemplate; but trying also to imagine what the sanctions are doing to distort the country for years and years to come simply exceeds one's means of expression.

Certainly the Iraqi regime seems largely untouched by the sanctions and, as for the Iraqi opposition being cultivated by the US to the tune of 100 million dollars, that seems pretty laughable. A profile of Ahmad Chalabi, that opposition's leader, that appears in a recent Sunday supplement of the *New York Times* is intended I think to balance the actual disaster of US Iraq policy with a portrait of the person supposedly battling for the future of his country.

What emerges instead is a picture of a shifty, shady man (wanted for embezzlement in Jordan) who in the course of the profile says not a single word about the sufferings of his people, not a single syllable, as if the whole issue was just a matter of his grandiose (somewhat silly plan) to try to take Basra and Mosul with 1000 men.

Purghardt's resignation may bring the matter of sanctions back to awareness for a little while, as may a stiff letter of objection sent by 40 members of the House of Representatives to Madeleine Albright about the cruelty and uselessness of the policy she has defended so vehemently.

But given the presidential campaign now under way, and the realities of American social and political injustice over the years, the sanctions against Iraq are likely to continue indefinitely. The Republican contender George W. Bush has just won the South Carolina primaries by basically appealing to the most hard-headed, stiff-necked, reactionary and self-righteous segment of the American population, the so-called Christian Right (Christian, in this instance, being an adjective rather woefully inappropriate to the sentiments this group and its chosen candidate habitually express).

And what is the basis of Bush's appeal? The fact that he sticks up for and symbolizes such values as applying the death penalty to more people than any other governor in history, or presiding over the largest prison population in any state in the US.

It is the organized, legalized cruelty and injustice of the American system that many of the country's citizens actually cherish and, in this electoral season want their candidates to defend and support, not just the cynical machismo of its random acts of violence like the gratuitous bombing of Sudan or last spring's sadistic offensive against Serbia.

Consider the following: a recently released report reveals that with 5 per cent of the world's population the US at the same time contains 25 per cent of the world's population of prisoners. Two million Americans are held in jails, of whom well over 45 per cent are African-American, a number that is disproportionately higher than the black population itself. (The US also consumes 30 per cent of the world's energy and ravages a rough equivalent in the earth's environment).

Under Bush's tenure as Governor of Texas the number of prisoners rose from 41,000 to 150,000; he actually boasts about these numbers. So in light of this contemporary savagery against its own citizens, one should not be surprised that the poor Iraqis who undergo long-distance starvation, absence of schools and hospitals, the devastation of agriculture and the civil infrastructure are put through so much.

To understand the continued punishment of Iraq - and also to understand why Mrs. Albright was so "understanding" of Israel's totally unwarranted and gangster-like bombing of civilian targets in Lebanon - one must pay close attention to an aspect of America's history mostly ignored by or unknown to educated Arabs and their ruling elites, who continue to speak of (and probably believe in) America's even-handedness.

The aspect I have in mind is the contemporary treatment of the African-American people who constitute roughly 20 per cent of the population, a not insignificant number. There is the great prior fact of slavery, first of all. Just to get an idea of how deliberately buried this fact was beneath the surface of the country's official memory and culture, note that until the

1970s no programme of literature and history paid the slightest attention to black culture or slavery or the achievements of the black people.

I received my entire university education between 1953 and 1963 in English and American literature, and yet all we studied was work written and done by white men, exclusively. No Dubois, no slave narratives, no Zora Neal Hurston, no Langston Hughes, no Ralph Ellison, no Richard Wright.

I recall asking a distinguished professor at Harvard who lectured for thirty more or less consecutive weeks during the academic year on 250 years of American literature from the Puritan 17th century preacher Jonathan Edwards to Ernest Hemingway, why he didn't also lecture on black literature: his answer was, "there is no black literature." There were no black students when I was educated at Princeton and Harvard, no black professors, no sign at all that the entire economy of half the country was sustained for almost 200 years by slavery, nor that 50 or 60 million people were brought to the Americas in slavery.

The fact wasn't worth mentioning until the civil rights movement took hold and pressed for changes in the law - until 1964 the law of the land discriminated openly against people of colour - as a result of a mass movement led by charismatic men and women. But it bears repeating that when such leaders became too visible and powerful - Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King pre-eminently - as well as politically radical, the system had to destroy them.

Be that as it may, there is a Holocaust Museum in Washington, but no museum of slavery which, considering that the Holocaust took place in Europe and slavery here, suggests the kind of priorities that still govern the official culture of the US. Certainly there should always be reminders of human cruelty and violence, but they should not be so selective as to exclude the obvious ones. Similarly no museum in Washington commemorates the extermination of the native people.

As a living monument of American injustice, therefore, we have the stark numbers of American social suffering. In relative but sometimes absolute terms, African-Americans supply the largest number of unemployed, the largest number of school drop-outs, the largest number of homeless, the largest number of illiterate, the largest number of drug addicts, the largest number of medically uninsured people, the

largest number of the poor.

In short by any of the socio-economic indices that matter, the black population of the United States, by far the richest country in recorded history, is the poorest, the most disadvantaged, the longest enduring historically in terms of oppression, discrimination and continued suppression. This is by no means about only poor African-Americans. A recent television documentary about black opera singers in which I participated displayed an ugly picture of naked discrimination at the very highest levels.

Against the background of so vicious a system of persecution then it is no wonder that as non-Europeans the Arabs, Muslims, Africans, and a handful of unfortunate others receive so poor a treatment in terms of US foreign policy. And not at all illogical that the *New York Times* abets Mrs Albright in being "understanding" against Israel's violence against Arabs. One of its editorials around the time of the Beirut bombing urged "restraint" on both sides, as if the Lebanese army was occupying Israel. Instead of the other way round.

The wonder of it, as I said earlier, is that we still wait for the US to deliver us from our difficulties, like some benign Godot about to appear in shining armour. Left to my devices as an educator I would stipulate across the Arab world that every university require its students to take at least two courses not in American history, but in American non-white history.

Only then will we understand the workings of US society and its foreign policy in terms of its profound, as opposed to its rhetorical, realities. And only then will we address the US and its people selectively and critically, instead of as supplicants and humble petitioners. Most important, we should then be able to draw sustenance from the struggle of the African-American people to achieve equality and justice. We share a common cause with them against injustice, but for some reason our leaders don't seem to know it.

When was the last time an Arab foreign minister on a visit to the US pointedly refused to address the Council of Foreign Relations in New York and Washington and requested instead to visit a major African-American church, university or meeting? That will be the day. Copyright Edward W. Said, 2000.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan.

# Losing a Philosophy over Hartal

by A Maher

Hartals on the streets are now almost a mere notion with frustrated people eyeing it as a repressive act rather than one of objection, their look is one of contempt. Even opposition politicians are fatigued over contemplating the outcome of a closure, they are secretly unsure of the ideals this time around.

AS Bangladesh lives through the turmoil of a dangerous birth in democracy it has in a short infancy of ten years, developed volatile tantrums to nurture such a concept. One democratic norm coming out from this exercise in administration is the acknowledgement that one has the right to protest against all unfavourable decisions in national life. The introduction of hartals (closed as public strikes, closures or with stronger tinges of human empathy) seemed to be effective in pushing home the point. It came about as a tool of strength; but before that it grew its roots as a symbol of the underlying thrust for togetherness of the Bengali psyche.

Culturally, this nation's populace has a tendency to cluster about randomly converging in a group to take some decision. Both democracy-styled governments used the hartal while in opposition with the autocratic one also opting to remould its ideals to accommodate such a tool. So it has become somewhat of a philosophy in the political contour. As far as healthy fathoming of our politicians' thinking goes, it was seen that the people readily accepted hartals to make their voice heard in the face of unjust

measures on them by the party in power. Every hartal had some common traits. The opposition calling the hartal would make it known to all that it was a movement called for 'by the people'. The aftermath of the hartal would also be reviewed with a similar people-oriented reaction - a 'successful' one was because of the people (the opposition) and an unsuccessful one also because the people had rejected it (the Government).

During BNP's rule as the first democratically elected government, hartals had this sort of sentiment which in a way reflected some degree of accomplishment in the practice of the political sport. Some people followed it, believing in the ideals being fought for while others shunned it completely, ignoring it outright. So democracy was seemingly practised. But of late it is noticeable that, to devout arbitrators hartals have lost their morals. It is hesitantly and hurriedly called, the supporters are not prepared just like those who oppose. Hartals on the streets are now almost a mere notion with frustrated people eyeing it as a repressive act rather than one of objection, their look is one of contempt. Even opposition

politicians are fatigued over contemplating the outcome of a closure, they are secretly unsure of the ideals this time around. Movements of this class originate from the influence of direct or discreet interventions of those who are morally, ethically and judgementally sound, leading the nation without a portfolio. Can we question the sanctity of our overall leadership, oppositions and governments? Can we question of reaping the rewards of the current boom since we might not be, in the next two to three generations?

One interesting question that comes to mind is why Bengalis are so incited by the idea of confrontation. When defensiveness means leaning on the shoulders of a very sound judging and evaluating system, the beneficiaries of our agrarian economy are in a fix. But since this has come down the times we find confrontation very visually satisfying with oozing results. So when we lose even the art of controlling confrontational media, we are there to be led by the scruffs of our necks in front of the naked global community. And now we have gone bad in that department too.

Two complementing types of effects of a confrontational at-

titude can be discerned. One is an interesting psychological approach incorporating the scientific principle of sensory adaptation. This is where the mental senses of the public are so constantly exposed to the prospects of hartals that they become immune to it. Also, take the overall effect of hartal on both sides. In the same viewpoint, and a little murky, there is no result due to both the political sides being too used to the practice to avail of any results. Another perspective suspects the state of the leaders to be similar to those atheists who, in a normal society (in the most neutral form of the word), may not be looked upon to shape social constitutions.

What this implies is not repressive to the public, with regard to hartals, because of exhausted lawmakers, but the alarming fact is that we have at last reached a point where the right to exercise cognition by our leaders are questioned. Both the battle-weary sides are now unfit to bark of ideals and ethics, when they have plunged themselves to depths forbidding practice of philosophy. When a nation is led by such stalwarts it is a fearful to visualise the consequences that may trickle down and drown the people.

# Clinton's 'Few Hours' in Islamabad

Aziz Haniffa writes from Washington

The decision comes after an advance team spent a week in Pakistan scouring Islamabad and its environs, scrutinising the security situation for a presidential stopover with a fine tooth comb before returning to Washington and giving the final okay to decision makers in the White House.

AFTER agonising over the issue for weeks, the White House has decided that President Bill Clinton will stop over in Islamabad for a few hours and confer with military leader Gen. Pervez Musharraf, senior administration and diplomatic sources said.

Sources told India Abroad News Service that an announcement of this decision would be made by the White House either on Monday or Tuesday.

The decision was made following a National Security Council meeting chaired by National Security Adviser Samuel Berger, his top aides and other senior officials from various departments and agencies, including the State Department and the Pentagon.

The sources said the decision comes after an advance team spent a week in Pakistan scouring Islamabad and its environs, scrutinising the security situation for a presidential stopover with a fine tooth comb before returning to Washington and giving the final okay to decision makers in the White House.

One source said the stopover by Clinton may involve Air Force One touching down on an air force base near Islamabad on its way back to Washington from Mumbai and the President having a luncheon discussion with Musharraf and his cabinet.

Thus, they said, there would be no fanfare of a motorcade from Islamabad Airport to the city for a meeting with the Pakistani leaders and his aides, avoiding giving the meeting any legitimacy of a state visit.

Meanwhile, Indian Ambassador Naresh Chandra, who was slated to meet White House Chief of Staff John Podesta on Friday, was requested instead to come in for a meeting on March 8 as Berger wanted to attend as well.

According to sources, Berger is likely to explain to Chandra the rationale for the administration's decision to have Clinton stop over in Pakistan, which New Delhi, while saying it's a sovereign decision of the U.S., hinted would not go down well with the Indian public.

Chandra told IANS that if Berger starts bringing up the issue of Pakistan and the reasons for Clinton deciding to stop over in that country, he would simply state: "Let's forget about Pakistan, let's talk about India."

Some analysts said it is a tremendous comedown for Pakistan to have Clinton spend only a few hours in the country that was Washington's former strategic ally after spending five days in India and a full day in Bangladesh.

They felt fundamentalists in Pakistan would give Musharraf a hard time saying it was an insult to the country and its people that the only reason Clinton would stop over at all for a few hours was to lecture the military dictator about how important it is for Pakistan to return to democratic rule and the grave consequences if it doesn't.

Meanwhile, some members of the Congressional Caucus on India were privately grumbling that co-chair Gary Ackerman was sitting on a letter to be sent to the President, urging him not to visit Islamabad.

They said the letter should have been sent days ago before the White House could reach a decision on whether Clinton would stop over in Islamabad or not and to counter a letter delivered to the White House on February 22 by nine Democratic Senators urging the President to visit Pakistan.

--India Abroad News Service

# Censorship Clouds Ancient Library's Rebirth

Dale Gavlak reports from Alexandria, Egypt

A modern version of the grand library of Alexandria, which was destroyed 1,600 years ago, is nearing completion in Egypt. Gemini News Service examines its progress and discovers a repressive atmosphere that would have cramped the style of the ancient scholars.

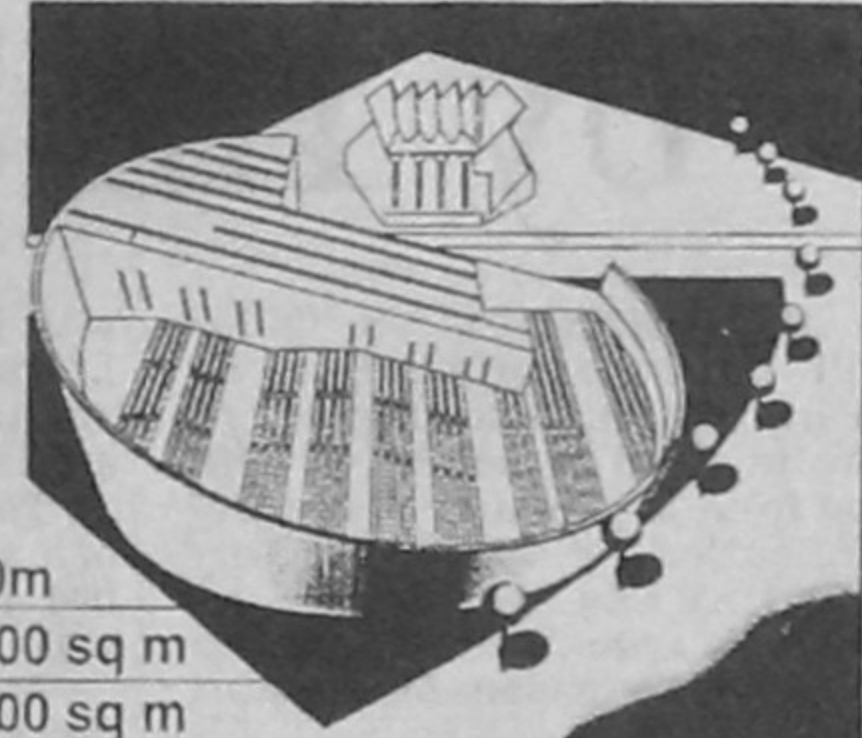
## Learning curve

Alexandria library was founded 2,290 years ago, one of the world's great centres of learning. Most of the 500,000 manuscripts were destroyed by fire in 47BC, the rest in civil strife. Their destruction was said to have "set civilisation back 1,500 years"



The new Alexandria library (right):

Cost:	\$200m
Total site area:	40,000 sq m
Total floor area:	69,000 sq m
Current stock:	400,000 titles
Capacity:	8m volumes; 50,000 maps; 100,000 manuscripts; 250,000 disks, tapes and videos



badi, a classics professor at Alexandria University who helped inspire the project, says the costs may prove prohibitive. The acquisition of books will cost a great deal and will require highly qualified librarians in technical fields and in managing such a complex library.

Abdadi recalls being teased more than a decade ago by the former head of the United States Library of Congress, Dr Daniel Boorstein, who commented: "So you want to build a great library? America can't even build another Library of Congress because of the costs."

Today, the Congress Library's Middle East acquisitions department hopes to co-operate with the Bibliotheca Alexandrina by exchanging items.

Greece has provided materi-

als and support, including busts of all the renowned scholars associated with the original library.

Madrid has provided works by Arab scholars from the era when Spain was under Moorish rule. Turkey has presented 10,000 volumes on the Ottoman Empire, and Oman 6,500 books. France and Canada have trained librarians and Italy has offered instruction in conservation methods.

A descendant of the renowned Roman general, Mark Antony - who gave his lover, Egypt's Queen Cleopatra, a gift of 200,000 volumes for the ancient library - has donated private collection of 17th and 18th century manuscripts.

To reach its full potential, however, the library needs more money as well as assurances that the authorities will

not interfere in its acquisitions policy. Although it is an independent facility, and has received support from UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), it is government-owned.

For the moment, both Zahran and Abdadi stress that no restrictions are imposed. Abdadi points out that research materials do not come under the state censor's watchful eye.

Such has not been the fate of the private, liberal arts American University in Cairo and its library, Egypt's largest English-language research facility.

Censors recently asked to see 800 titles out of a shipment of 8,000 books destined for the university. Eighty were banned. A handful were core to the university's curriculum, including Islamic Political Thought by Montgomery Watt and Muslim Extremism in Egypt by Gilles Kepel. Other works, including Maxim Rodinson's Mohammed and Al-Khuzb Al-Hafi (For Bread Alone) by Mohamed Shukri, were banned because of material considered blasphemous to Islam and sexual references.

However, several of the bans were lifted after an appeal by the university president John Gerhart.

From the university's point of view, banning books is counterproductive and unnecessary, he said. "But from the legal point of view, there is no question that the government has the right to do this, and there's no question that we have to comply with it."

In January, censors banned 14 newspapers and newsletters, including one published by the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights. The head of the organisations, Hafez Abou Saeda, says the clampdown may be linked to group's report on Al-Kosheh, a village in Upper Egypt in which 23 people were killed in sectarian clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians during the Christian New Year.

Besides state censorship, Sunni Islam's pre-eminent centre, Al-Azhar, in Cairo has prohibited 200 books in recent years, and removed publications from various bookshops around the country.

The scholars and free thinkers who gathered at the ancient library of Alexandria would find themselves cramped in such an atmosphere.

—Gemini News

The author is a print and radio journalist who specialises in social and political issues. She has lived in the Middle East for more than a decade, mainly in Egypt and Jordan

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TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

James Bond

