

Miles DeCoster

Government bias and the need for a new politics

Government indifference to the public welfare and bias in favor of corporate interests was highlighted last week in three developments, one regarding nuclear weapons tests in Nevada, another about illness from the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam and the third concerning safety of nuclear power plants.

In the first case, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 10th circuit overturned a federal judge's ruling that government negligence in above-ground nuclear weapons tests from 1951 to 1962 caused cancer in residents downwind from the Nevada test site. The court found that the Federal Tort Claims Act, which allows citizens to sue the government for negligence, did not apply in this case. But former Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall, one of the victims' attorneys, charged that courts "all over the country seem to be repealing" the Torts Act in favor of "the king can do no wrong." This is a sad, sad turn of events," Udall said.

One plaintiff put it in a larger and more meaningful context. The trial court had found that her 13-year-old son's death from cancer was caused by fallout from the nuclear tests and had awarded her compensation. After this was thrown out on appeal, she lamented that she had not "got one penny and probably never will.... We can take care of the whole world," she said, "give millions to the contras—but not one penny for the kids down here who died."

In the Agent Orange case, the court upheld settlements of some 250,000 claims filed by Vietnam War veterans injured when that herbicide was used to defoliate large areas of Vietnam where guerrilla forces were hiding. The lawsuits against Dow Chemical Company, Monsanto Company and five other Agent Orange manufacturers could have run into billions of dollars. Yet it was settled for some \$200 million because the plaintiffs realized that their chances of winning were slim, while the companies realized that they might well have spent as much for attorneys' fees alone, even if they won all the cases.

The decisions of the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New York mean that some 20,000 totally disabled veterans will receive \$12,000 each; whatever is left over will be divided among the remaining 230,000 vets injured when they were exposed to Agent Orange. "The size of the settlement seems extraordinary," said Justice Ralph K. Winter, who wrote the main decision. But he described the settlement as "essentially a payment of nuisance value," arguing that various studies "offer little scientific basis for believing that Agent Orange caused injury."

All in all, it was a grudging agreement to a paltry settlement, one that offers about one year's poverty income to those totally disabled and virtually nothing to others whose injuries were less severe. The chemical companies have already contributed to a \$180 million fund that has grown to about \$220 million, but the judge, while dismissing the veterans' claims against the government, indicated he didn't like the idea of holding chemical companies liable for selling a product the army ordered for use in a war. In short, the court's sympathies were with the giant corporations that profited from the war, not with the men who were forced to fight it and whose lives have been destroyed by it.

In the case of the NRC, two members of Congress, Sen. John Glenn (D-OH) and Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-MA), severely criticized the Reagan-appointed managers. Glenn called for the resignation of one of the five commissioners, while Markey asked the head of the

agency's staff to remove himself from proceedings of a controversial regulatory dispute. Both demands stem from the NRC commissioners' bias in favor of the nuclear power industry and their public-be-damned attitudes toward safety. This has included coaching companies on how to overcome problems and passing on documents on flaws in a nuclear power plant to a company to help it cope with a commission investigation.

In this case at least, some Congress members are speaking up for the public and against corporate interests. Their demands reflect a growing popular awareness of government bias in favor of big business and its increasingly callous disregard of public needs and safety.

One straw in the wind in this regard has been the increasingly friendly response in Iowa to the Rev. Jesse Jackson's campaigning for the 1988 presidential nomination. "I haven't seen anyone come into Iowa with a message as appealing as his," says the editor of the *Des Moines Register*. "When he asks why the government can bail out Chrysler and Continental Illinois but can't save a farmer from foreclosure—that's a question that plays on Main Street," he added. And it's one Jackson asks everywhere—now bolstered by scathing references to the \$23 million paid to Lee Iacocca last year by a Chrysler Corporation rescued by taxpayers' money and the sacrifices in wages and working conditions by its workers, thousands of whom have been permanently laid off.

The question of who the government represents, of what our social priorities as a nation should be, could prove a major theme in the coming elections. Jackson will certainly play on this theme, and Democratic presidential candidate Paul Simon may give it some attention. If so, we could see a revival in political interest among working Americans.

Gorbachov comes to terms with new reality

Until the early '60s the world Communist movement was seen—and saw itself—as a monolith. Not only were the Communist-ruled nations expected to follow unquestioningly the theoretical and practical dictates of the Soviet Communist Party, but all Communist parties, East and West—excepting only the renegades of Yugoslavia—talked and usually acted as if the Soviet model were "the sole correct path for mankind," as Italy's Palmiro Togliatti said in the early '50s. His view was supported by Soviet tanks in Poland and Hungary when the people of those nations attempted to seek their own paths to socialism, while in the West, in order to keep their franchises, Communist parties willingly, even doggedly, followed the Moscow line.

The first unsealable crack in the monolith occurred when China rejected the Soviet lead and struck out on its own in the early '60s. From then on, as Maoism became a force in the world—however briefly—things would never again be the same. Since then, both in the East, where forces for change have attempted in various ways to move away from the Soviet model, and in the West, where Communist parties experimented with Eurocommunism in the '70s and experienced a general decline in the '80s, the Communist movement worldwide has become increasingly diverse.

But it has taken the Soviet party a long time to acknowledge these changes. Like the Cold Warriors in the West who have a vested interest in the idea of an Evil Empire centered in Moscow and dictating to puppet parties around the globe, so the leaders of the Soviet Union have tried to hold onto their position of pre-eminence—with force if necessary, as was demonstrated in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Poland in 1981-82.

Now, however, Mikhail Gorbachov has given official recognition to the facts of life. "We are far from calling on anyone to copy us," he said on his April 10 visit to Prague. Every Communist country, he added, "has its specific features, and the fraternal parties determine their political line with a view to the national conditions." This means, he said, that "no one is entitled to claim a special status in the socialist world. The independence of every party, its responsibility toward its people, the right to the sovereign solution of problems of the country's development—these are unconditional principles for us."

It is, of course, too early to say just what this actually will mean. If, for example, there should be a revival of the Solidarity movement in Poland would the Soviets now allow a true sharing of power? They will if Gorbachov means what he says and if he has the backing of his party's leadership. In any case, this statement of Soviet policy represents a fundamental change in attitude toward its Eastern European satellites and can only hasten the process of genuine independence.

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By Ammiel Alcalay

Israel's Sephardic Jews do not fit their zealously anti-Arab stereotype

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THE TERMS IN which the Arab-Israeli conflict are presented perpetuate biases that constitute part of the conflict. One of the terms, Sephardic or Oriental Jewry, has appeared with increasing frequency in recent years, often amid heated debate. The common assumption is that Jews from Arab countries harbor deep-seated hostility toward Arabs, take a much harder anti-Arab stand than Ashkenazi or "European" Israelis, and that they may even constitute a major stumbling block to peace initiatives. These attitudes, bandied about so easily, appear to have crystallized in the voting patterns that brought the Likud to power in 1977.

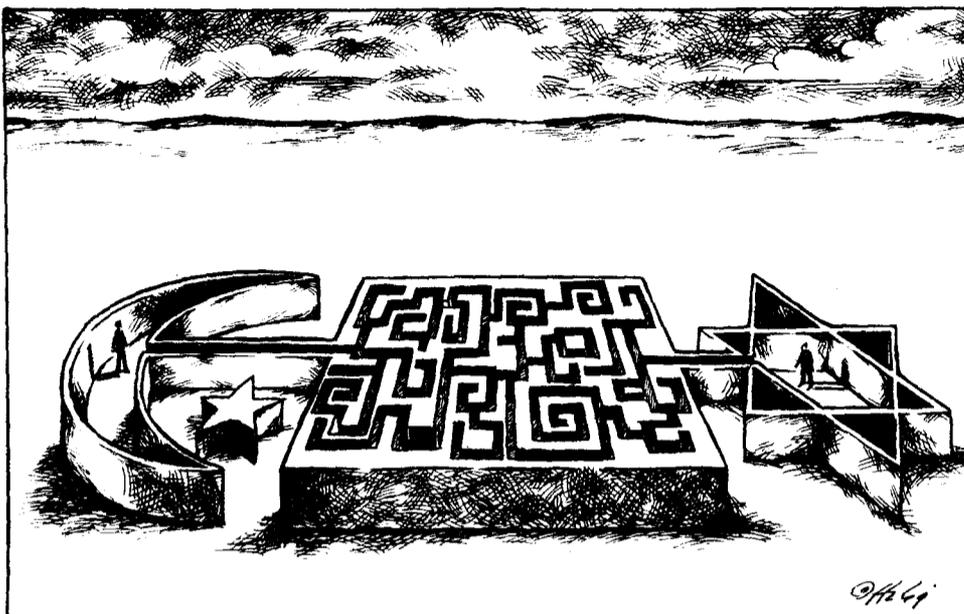
Ironically, this shift in voting was not accepted as a decision by part of the population to exert their democratic will and express dissatisfaction with previous governments. Instead, it seems to many a confirmation of their worst fears: that the "Orientals" were emotional, prone to mob rule and the endearment of patriarchal figures, that they had no traditions of democracy and—worst of all, in terms of liberal sentiment—that their "true hatred" of the Arabs would now have a chance to flourish. Yet more acute political analysts pointed to the Likud's new constituency more as a rejection of the Labor Party, stemming from resentment of their exclusion from it than as support of Likud policies.

In general, studies of Sephardic Jews have continued to employ Euro-centric models that are inadequate and incapable of conveying the Sephardic experience. Furthermore, few studies have grasped the significance of the native culture of the Sephardim within the Mediterranean and Arab worlds as a key to the history of the region, or the development of alternative cultural, social, political and intercommunal models for the future. One of the aims of the study "The Sephardic Community and the Peace Process," which was initiated in 1984 by the Institute for Middle East Peace and Development at the City University of New York, was to lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive view of the context of Oriental Jewry, in both Israel and the region.

To achieve this, a substantially different approach than that of standard survey polls had to be devised, one that could take into account both the history and diversity of the Jewish communities in the region and the fact that Sephardic Jews had been active and vital participants in most, if not all, facets of life in each of the countries they had lived in. At the same time, the study aimed to record the process of changing assumptions regarding how Sephardim were viewed and depicted, and to trace the development of alternatives currently emerging from the Sephardic community.

After preliminary testing and research it became clear that the Arab-Israeli conflict could not be separated from related feelings about Arabs, life in Israel and each respondent's personal and communal past.

Shortsighted: Since the loss of Arabic as a native language among Jews must be considered one of the most astonishingly short-sighted and damaging effects of the mass socialization process undergone by Jews from Arab countries upon their arrival in Israel, a decision was made to seek as high a percentage of respondents as possible



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whose first language had been Arabic. Thus, the first question was simply: What is your native tongue?

This was followed by such questions as: Do you prefer to speak Arabic, how do you feel when you speak it, did you teach it to your children?

From here, questions led to life in the country of origin: Where are you from, what kind of neighborhood did you live in, what did you or your parents do there, what were relations with Arabs like?

In the second section, covering the transitional years, questions were again asked about relations with Arabs: Were there relations? If so, were they different than they were in the country of origin? What kinds of feelings did this arouse?

The third section, straightforward political questions, put the respondent firmly in the driver's seat, for by this point in the interview people had already said so much about their past that they felt comfortable enough to know they were being listened to and taken seriously. Again, the study did not impose a particular structure and measure its statistical outcome, but assumed that what a respondent had to say was of value.

Since a number of interviews were done within families, all responses were cross-checked from an intergenerational point of view. For example, if someone was too young to remember something specific from his country of origin, he was asked to relate a story or incident told by his parents that seemed symbolic of life in that country.

Older people were also asked how they thought their children might respond, and vice versa.

From more than 600 pages of transcribed interviews, a few broad generalizations can be made. First, the more knowledgeable a person is about his past, the more confident he is that compromise solutions are possible. This knowledge is acquired within the family and filters into the educational sys-

Those who are most knowledgeable about their past in Arab nations are also the most likely to believe compromise solutions are possible.

tem, the surrounding culture and society in general. The primary conflict here is between home and the world outside.

Surprising results: Contrary to what some other studies have asserted, this research did not find even one case of parents who were more right-wing than their children who were born and educated in Israel. This seems to stem from the younger generation's insecure identity and ambivalence about their place in Israeli society, which leads to a tendency to overcompensate, to be more Israeli than the Israelis.

Once this younger generation perceives

that hostility toward Arabs is not only condoned but may, in fact, serve as a kind of entrance ticket to the mainstream, they use their vague and incomplete picture of their family's past along with their resentment of Ashkenazim as a positive experience, to assert that they really know "how it is with the Arabs."

Rather than proving that such attitudes are handed down from one generation to the next within the family, the trends recorded in this research seem to prove the exact opposite: that people mold one aspect of an imperfectly grasped past experience in order to make positive assertions regarding their own status within stereotypes and biases of the society at large. This also is a more psychologically accurate assessment of the way people use their past in situations of stress.

This younger generation—estranged, culturally dispossessed and still unable to claim its fair share within Israel—remains a potentially volatile element whose rage and alienation often lie just below the surface. Such things as "education by democracy," for example, can only be received with cynicism by people who feel victimized by an unjust opportunity structure. As a Moroccan-born respondent commented:

First of all, as an educator, I would clean up the educational system. For example, this year was declared 'the year of democracy' in the educational system. I come to schools to talk about democracy, and I talk about the Arabs, but how can I speak with the students when the teachers themselves are poisoned? Because of my experience, I would start the educational system from scratch. I would see who is suited to be an educator and who is not. I wouldn't say a 'teacher,' but an 'educator' who doesn't drip poison into the souls of the students.

Honest emotions: The most striking aspect of the way people who were born in Arab countries speak about Arabs is in the range of emotions they allow themselves to display: from suspicion and anger to respect, envy, true feelings of loss and an extremely deep sense of commonality. It is more significant that none of these feelings are masks for ideology. In fact, it became increasingly clear throughout the research that while differences might make communication more difficult or artificial between Arabs and

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