

Experience Over Hope

You've got to watch your step in my household. I do, at any rate. On Jan. 20, at about 12:40, I rang my wife at home and asked, "You watching this?" She said that she was.

"That speech, eh?" I said, preparing for a sneer and a jeer. "We will roll back the specter of a warming planet.' What's that about?"

"I liked the speech," she said coldly. "I thought Obama was good."

"Oh, right," I said.

Later that evening, however, I had another try. My wife had just returned from choir practice, and we were watching a news summary. There was The Speech again.

"Blimey," I said. "What cod Biblical rhetoric. No, what cod 18th-century..."

She gave me a warning look. "I like it," she said.

Ours is a mixed marriage. My wife is an American. At college she would sometimes hang with the SDS crowd, and once, many years ago, she called me a "12-year-old knee-jerk fascist," which was about right. Since then we have moved on and occasionally share a position in the extreme center. We both liked Ron Paul and Mike Huckabee and, with caveats, Ralph Nader. Neither of us ever liked, to put it mildly, Hillary Clinton or Rudy Giuliani.

But Obama has appealed to the better angels of Mrs. Reid's nature, and I fear that it will be some time before I can express myself freely—that is, with savage disregard for truth, moderation, and decency—on the matter of America's King of Cool.

It's not just my wife, either. In the public square the love for Obama is palpable, and you can see why. By wasting no time in ordering the closure of Guantanamo Bay and the ending of rendition

and enhanced interrogation, he has shown that he wants to give peace a chance, and who doesn't? But it seems clear he is going to give war a chance, too. What we have here, surely, is another imperial presidency. From London, at any rate, it looks as though it is going to be business as usual—unless the slump reduces us all to barter and cannibalism. If that happens, Obama will be so busy putting down local insurrections that he'll have to leave our colonial possessions to muddle through on their own.

It is precisely the imperial aspect of the Obama administration that appeals to many so-called conservatives in Britain. These people—radical liberals who five years ago were right behind George W. Bush—are often quite soppy about the new president. Even as Obama waited to place his hand on Abe's Bible, the recovering hawk Iain Martin was waxing almost tearful on the *Daily Telegraph* website about a man he considers "at core a leftie" (if only...):

The pictures from Washington DC are hypnotic. The excitement ... is contagious. [Colleagues] have told their young children to watch the great moment in the hope that they can remember it in 70 years or so when most of us will be gone. ... One of the greatest nations on earth is in the process of demonstrating once again its extraordinary capacity for regeneration, renewal and reinvention.

The one issue that is not an issue here is abortion. Very few on Britain's radical Right—or anywhere else for that matter—are troubled by Obama's decision to overturn the ban on federal funding for overseas agencies that provide abortions. Most of these people, furthermore, will be delighted when the president renews funding for embryonic stem-cell research. In other words, most Britons who call themselves conservatives have no interest at all in the only feature of the Bush years that was actually conservative.

And now comes the scary bit. I find myself warming to the former president, feeling protective of him. The booing of Bush at the inauguration was sickening, the smugness on the liberal Left intolerable. "The nightmare is over!" said Jon Snow, anchor of Channel 4 News. You'd never guess from the response of the great and the good, the well-educated and the nicely dressed, that the United States is a democracy and that, hanging chads notwithstanding, Bush was twice elected president. You'd think there'd been a massive campaign of civil disobedience and that a brutal tyrant had been thrown out.

I can hardly believe I am saying this. I have spent much of the past seven years bad-mouthing Bush. I was against the war on terror from the moment the first plane flew into the World Trade Center. I have always loathed Bush's chippy swagger, his inappropriate John Wayne salutes, and his frat-boy smirk. Trickiest of all is that I consider him to be a war criminal, objectively speaking anyway. The big question now is: can Mrs. Reid learn to live with a man who has abandoned all claims to moral and intellectual consistency? The next four years will tell. ■

Bibi's Guns

"Where there is no solution, there is no problem," geostrategist James Burnham once wryly observed.

Ex-Sen. George Mitchell, the latest U.S. negotiator to take up the Palestine portfolio, may discover what Burnham meant. For Israel's three-week war on Gaza, where Palestinians died at a rate of 100 to one to Israelis, appears to have been, like Israel's wars in Lebanon, another Pyrrhic victory for the Jewish state.

In 1982, after an attempted assassination of their ambassador in London, Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon drove through Lebanon to Beirut, shelling the city for weeks until Arafat agreed to pull out the PLO and depart for Tunisia. The Israelis' triumph quickly turned to ashes in their mouths.

Weeks of bombarding Beirut turned world opinion against Israel. Defense Minister Sharon was savaged for enabling a massacre in the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps. Most critically, as future Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin ruefully observed, in invading a quiescent south Lebanon, Israel "let the Shia genie out of the bottle."

South Lebanon became Indian country. Hezbollah, born of Israel's invasion, would, 18 years later, force a bleeding Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its Lebanese allies out of the country, turning Israel's once-friendly northern border into a new battlefield in the Arab-Israeli war.

Moreover, the Americans, persuaded to send Marines to train the Lebanese Army, were punished with terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks at Beirut airport, with 241 U.S. dead.

President Reagan would withdraw, and the Americans never came back.

In 2006, Ehud Olmert used the border ambush of an Israel patrol and the kid-

napping of two soldiers to launch a second Lebanon war.

Hezbollah lost hundreds of fighters, but its stature soared as it became the first Arab force to fight Israel and emerge unbroken and unbeaten. And the thousands of Hezbollah rockets that rained down on the Galilee destroyed forever the myth of Israeli invulnerability.

Now, in the aftermath of the war on Gaza, which almost all in Israel supported, come the second thoughts. Of 1,400 dead from air strikes and invasion, one-third were Palestinian children. Al Jazeera's video of the dead and dying civilians, juxtaposed with a video of Barack Obama enjoying a round of golf in scenic Hawaii, were devastating for the U.S. image as the U.S. weapons used by Israel to deliver the death and destruction.

Like Hezbollah, Hamas has emerged more entrenched, while the moderates like Mahmoud Abbas are portrayed as Quislings. Now a rift has appeared between Obama, who has called for a lifting of the Israeli blockade of Gaza to allow aid and commerce to flow freely, and an Israel determined to maintain its chokehold on Hamas.

In none of these three wars was the Israel Air Force challenged or the IDF defeated. In casualties, Hezbollah and Hamas, Lebanese and Gazans, all suffered many times more dead and wounded.

Yet looking back, were any of these wars necessary? Did any make Israel more secure than when the Lebanese border was quiet? Does the future look brighter today than in 1982, after the peace with Egypt and withdrawal from Sinai, before the war on Beirut?

Three months before launching the Gaza war, Olmert told two journalists that Israel, to achieve lasting peace, would have to return the Golan Heights to Syria and almost all of the West Bank to the Palestinians, and give East Jerusalem back to the Arabs who live there.

"In the end, we will have to withdraw from the lion's share of the territories, and for the territories we leave in our hands, we will have to give compensation in the form of territories within the state of Israel at a ratio that is more or less 1:1."

"Whoever wants to hold on to all of (Jerusalem) will have to bring 270,000 Arabs inside the fences of sovereign Israel. It won't work." No, it won't.

Like Rabin in 1994 and Barak in 2000, two of the most decorated soldiers in Israel's history, Olmert had concluded, late in life, that it is either land for peace, with all its risks, or endless war for Israel.

Yet after that interview, he launched the December blitz and invaded Gaza, killing and wounding 5,000 Palestinians, making of the Strip a zone of permanent hatred and making Hamas, whom he sought to dethrone and undeniably wounded, even stronger.

Enraged that Hamas was not destroyed or disarmed, Israelis are leaning toward the Likud Party of "Bibi" Netanyahu, who opposed the withdrawal from Gaza, opposes a withdrawal from the West Bank, will never share Jerusalem, and calls Gaza "Hamastan."

Should he win, a Bibi-Barack collision appears inevitable. Backing Bibi will be the Israeli lobby, the Evangelicals, the neocons, and a Congress that could find only five members to oppose a resolution endorsing all the Israelis had done and were doing to the people of Gaza.

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