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Sharon Wears Oppressor's Cloak

BY ROBERT SCHEER

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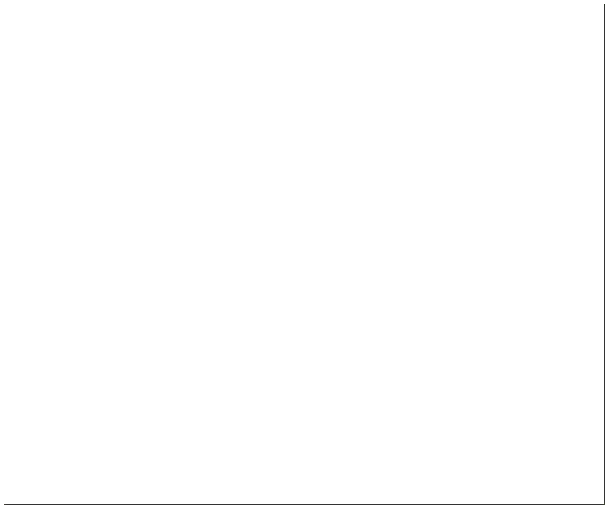
ROBERT SCHEER WRITES A SYNDICATED COLUMN.

What is the fundamental difference between Slobodan Milosevic and Ariel Sharon? The former is on trial for war crimes, while the latter still leads an occupying army.

For those already loosing angry e-mails from their quivers, I ask you to take a few minutes to consider the comparison before rushing to defend Sharon's scorched-earth march through the West Bank as a necessary response to the terrorists that Yasser Arafat either condones or has been too gutless to stop.

Milosevic, like Sharon, cited the terror tactics of neighboring peoples--Croatians, Bosnians and ethnic Albanians who stood in the way of his vision of a secure Yugoslavia--as a rationale for preemptive use of massive military force against them.

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An occupied people can get ugly in their resistance, unless a near-saint such as Mohandas Gandhi or Nelson Mandela leads the movement away from mayhem while winning political victories. Arafat is anything but a saint, and there is much blood on his hands. But it is always the occupier, with the big guns and control of the real estate, that holds the real keys to reconciliation.

Rarely does such an occupation end voluntarily; land is exchanged for peace only when the occupiers feel there is no other choice. Both the plan laid out by former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell and the recent Saudi-inspired Arab League peace proposal offered such an option, but Sharon would not accept it anymore than Milosevic would the compromises presented to him up to the end of the Yugoslavia wars.

Instead, both have sought to destroy any momentum toward peace by waging war.

Sharon has humiliated President Bush, not only by ignoring his demand for a withdrawal but by co-opting the president's war-on-terrorism code phrases as cover for his drive to prevent-- forever, if possible--a Palestinian state. How simple it would be if only the "axis of evil" targeted civilians, but from Saddam Hussein to Hamas to Sharon, nobody in the Mideast conflagration has a monopoly on such cruelty.

By blasting through West Bank towns, possibly burying children in their wake, the once-proud Israel Defense Forces is heading down toward the moral level of suicide bombers.

Whatever is ultimately discovered about the carnage committed by Israel's forces, enough is known to implicate Sharon for a form of ethnic cleansing--purposefully destroying the Palestinians' ability to govern themselves. The systematic destruction of the signposts of nascent Palestinian statehood--statistics bureaus, education ministries, electricity and water supplies--is aimed at further uprooting a refugee population.

Despite stereotypes, Serbs did not start out as oppressive occupiers any more than did Israelis; both their peoples suffered terribly during World War II and sought peace within secure borders. However, the historical insecurity of both peoples has led them into the role of oppressor, feeding a cycle of resistance and repression.

This is the opposite of what the idealistic Zionists who founded Israel had in mind. They always knew that the ultimate test of the new state would not be merely its ability to survive but rather its ability to survive with democratic values intact.

Almost 70% of Israel's officer corps in the 1967 Six-Day War had been raised in the idealism of the kibbutz movement. They deemed justice a universal right--even for Palestinians.

Of course, an Arab world that long refused to accept and guarantee Israel's right to exist did much to kill that idealism. Yet Israel's decision to keep the captured territories has ultimately boomeranged, drastically undermining its democracy and stability.

"If Israel does not find the way to disengage from the Palestinians, its future might resemble the experience of Belfast or Bosnia--two communities bleeding each other to death for generations," said former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak this week in an op-ed article. "Alternatively, if we do not disengage from the Palestinians, Israel might drift toward an apartheid state."

Unfortunately, under the heavy hand of Barak's successor Israel already is an apartheid state. This may be what Sharon and Arafat prefer to the Camp David compromise, but it represents the deepest betrayal of the interests of both the Palestinians and Jews.

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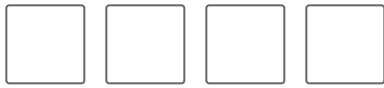


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