

Remembering Edward Said Five Years On

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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Born in West Jerusalem in 1935. Exiled in December 1947. Said was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia in 1991, a malignant cancer of the bone marrow and blood. At 6:45AM on September 25, 2003, he succumbed (at age 67) after a painful courageous 12 year struggle. Tributes followed and resumed a year later. In a testimony to his teacher, Professor Moustafa Bayoumi called him “indefatigable, incorruptible, a humanist and devastatingly charming....leav(ing behind) legions of followers and fans in every corner of the world. I am lost without him....I miss him so.”

Chomsky called his death an “incalculable loss.” A year later, Ilan Pappé said “his absence seems to me still incomprehensible. What would have happened if we still had Edward with us in this last year....another terrible (one) for the values (he) represented and causes he defended.” Tariq Ali referred to his “indomitable spirit as a fighter, his will to live, (my) long-standing friend and comrade,” and described his ordeal:

“Over the last eleven years one had become so used to his illness – the regular hospital stays, the willingness to undergo trials with the latest drugs, the refusal to accept defeat – that (we thought) him indestructible.” Leukemia kills, and in response to Ali’s questions, his doctor said there was “no medical explanation for (his) survival.” No doubt Dr. Kanti Rai made a difference. Said spoke of him reverentially – of his “redoubtable medical expertise and remarkable humanity” that kept him going during his darkest times, and there were many. He later described months in and out of the hospital, “painful treatments, blood transfusions, endless tests, hours and hours of unproductive time spent staring at the ceiling, draining fatigue and infection, inability to do normal work, and thinking, thinking, thinking.”

Yet, as Ali recounted, in the end the “monster (overpowered him), devouring his insides (but when) the cursed cancer finally took him the shock was intense.” Palestinians had lost their “most articulate (and powerful) voice....(he’s) irreplaceable.”

Veteran Palestinian-American journalist Ramzy Baroud agrees. He called 2003 a bad time for Palestinians to lose one their iconic best and described him like many others: He “stood for everything that is virtuous. His moral stance was even more powerful than (his) essays, books and music (as critic, scholar and consummate artist)....He was an extraordinary intellectual, thoughtful....inimitable” and never silent or compromising in his beliefs or virtue. No “wonder he....was adored by (his) people (and) detested by the” forces he opposed.

Phyllis Bennis called him “one of the great internationalist intellectuals of our time....a hero of the Palestinian people (and) the global peace and justice movement as well....(my) great mentor, a challenging collaborator, a remarkable friend....his passion, vision, wit (and fury

against injustice) will be terribly missed.”

Daniel Barenboim called him a “fighter and a compassionate defender. A man of logic and passion. An artist and a critic....a visionary (who) fought for Palestinian rights while understanding Jewish suffering.” In 1999, they jointly founded the West-East Divan – an orchestra for young Arabs and Jews who collaboratively “understood that before Beethoven we all stand as equals....Palestinians have lost a formidable defender, the Israelis a no less formidable adversary, and I a soulmate.”

Rashid Khalidi is the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia where Said taught for nearly 40 years as a Professor of English and Comparative Literature. He called him “a man of vast erudition and learning, of extraordinary versatility and remarkable (interdisciplinary) expertise.” We’ve lost “one of the most profound, original and influential thinkers of the past half-century (and) a fearless independent voice speaking truth to the entrenched powers that dominate the Middle East.”

On September 30, 2003, Columbia University paid tribute as well. It mourned the passing of its “beloved and esteemed university professor.” Called him one of the world’s most influential scholars, and said “the world has lost a brilliant and beautiful mind, a big heart, and a courageous fighter.”

When he learned of his illness and its seriousness, Said decided to write (from memory) a biographical account of his childhood, upbringing and early years in Palestine, Lebanon and Egypt. Titled “Out of Place, A Memoir,” he called it “a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world....a subjective account of (his life) in the Arab world” of his birth and formative years. Then in America where he attended boarding school, Princeton for his bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and Harvard for his doctorate.

He began “Out of Place” in 1994 while recovering from three early rounds of chemotherapy and continued to completion with the help and “unstinting kindness and patience” of the “superb nurses” who spent months caring for him as well as his family and friends whose support helped him finish.

He recounted a young man’s coming of age. Of coming to terms with being displaced. An American. A Christian. A Palestinian. An outsider, and ultimately the genesis of an intellectual giant. An uncompromising opponent of imperialism and oppression, and an advocate for his peoples’ struggle for justice and self-determination. No one made the case more powerfully or with greater clarity than he did – in his books, articles, opinion pieces, and wherever he spoke around the world. He made hundreds of appearances and became a target of pro-Israeli extremists. They threatened him and his family. Once burned his Columbia University office, but never silenced him or ever could. Nor did the FBI in spite of over 30 years of surveillance the way it monitors all prominent outspoken activists and intellectuals and many of lesser stature.

Said’s great writings include *Orientalism* (1978) in which he explained a pattern of western misinterpretation of the East, particularly the Middle East. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he broadened *Orientalism*’s core argument to show the complex relationships between East and West. Colonizers and the colonized, “the familiar (Europe, West, us) and the strange (the Orient, East, them).”

His writings showed the breath of his scholarship, interests and activism – on comparative

literature, literary criticism, culture, music and his many works on Israeli-Palestinian history and conflict – combining scholarship, passion and advocacy for his people in contrast to the West’s one-sided view of Arabs and Islam. He championed equity and justice. Denounced imperialism, and believed Israel has a right to exist but not exclusively for Jews at the expense of indigenous Palestinians.

The 1967 war and illegal occupation changed everything for him. It radicalized him. Set the course of his intellectual career and activism, and made him the Palestinians’ leading spokesperson for the next 37 years until his death. He advocated a one-state solution and wrote in 1999: “The beginning is to develop something entirely missing from both Israeli and Palestinian realities today: the idea and practice of citizenship, not of ethnic or racial community, as the main vehicle of coexistence.”

In a lengthy January 1999 New York Times op-ed he elaborated: “Palestinian self-determination in a separate state is unworkable (after years earlier believing otherwise). The question (now isn’t separation) but to see whether it is possible for (Jews and Palestinians) to live together (in the same land) as fairly and peacefully as possible. What exists now is a disheartening...bloody impasse. There is no way for Israel to get rid of Palestinians or for Palestinians to wish Israelis away....I see no other way than to begin now to speak about sharing the land that has thrust us together, sharing it in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for each citizen.”

This diminishes life and aspirations for neither side. It affirms self-determination for them both together in the same land where they once lived peacefully. But it doesn’t mean “special status for one people at the expense of the other.” For millennia, Palestine was the homeland for many peoples, predating the Ottomans and Romans. It’s “multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious.” There’s no “historical justification for homogeneity” or for “notions of national or ethnic and religious purity....The alternatives (today) are unpleasantly simple: either the war continues (with its unacceptable costs)” or an equitable way out is found, obstacles notwithstanding.

Oslo wasn’t the answer, and Said denounced it in its run-up and weeks later in a London Review of Books piece titled “The Morning After.” In stinging language, he referred to “the fashion-show vulgarities of the White House ceremony, the degrading spectacle of Yasser Arafat thanking everyone for the suspension of most of his people’s rights, and the fatuous solemnity of Bill Clinton’s performance, like a 20th century Roman emperor shepherding two vassal kings through rituals of reconciliation and obeisance (and) the truly astonishing proportions of the Palestinian capitulation.”

For him, Oslo was plainly and simply “an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles,” and worst of all is that a better deal could have been had without so many “unilateral concessions to Israel.” The same goes for the 1978 Camp David Accords and every “peace” negotiation to the present except the “permanent status” 2000 Camp David “generous” and “unprecedented” offer that Arafat turned down and was unfairly pilloried for spurning peace for conflict.

Said was on top of everything to the end as reflected in “The Last Interview” – a documentary film less than a year before his death. After a decade of illness, he agreed to a final film interview at a time he was drained, weakened and dying, yet found it “very difficult to turn (himself) off.” It was a casual conversation between himself and journalist Charles Glass reflecting on his childhood, upbringing, writing, scholarship, involvement with Yasser

Arafat, and strong opinions and activism on Palestinian issues.

It was in all his writings and outspokenness – so powerful, passionate, virtuous and a testimony to his uncompromising principles. He described “Sharonian evil.” His blind destructiveness. His terrorism in ordering the massacring of children, then congratulating one pilot for his great success. The patently dishonest media. Its one-sided support for Israel. Its suppressing other views. Its turning a blind eye to the grossest crimes against humanity, day after day after day. Of relegating public discourse to repetitive official propaganda. Of subverting truth in support of power and privilege.

Of turning Palestine into an isolated prison. Suffocating an entire people of their existence. Of impoverishing, starving and slaughtering them. Of attacking defenseless civilians with tanks and F-16s. Of blaming victims for their own terror. Of creating a vast wasteland of destruction and human misery. Of sanctioning torture and targeted assassinations as official policy. Of committing every imaginable human indignity and degradation against people whose only crime is their faith, ethnicity, and presence. Whose only defense is their will and redoubtable spirit. Of enlisting world support for the most unspeakable, unrelenting campaign of terror and genocide.

Of pursuing an endless “cycle of violence” and consigning Palestinians to a “slow death” in defense of imperial interests and the national security state. Of pursuing peace as a scheme for “pacification.” Of placing the onus for it “squarely on Palestinian shoulders.” Of “putting an end to the (Palestinian) problem.” Of placing huge demands on Palestinians and making no concessions in return. Of calling resistance “terrorism” while ignoring oppressive occupation as the fundamental problem. Of seeing Palestinians endure and survive in spite of every imaginable assault, affront and indignity. Of piling on even more and seeing an even greater will to survive and prevail.

Said was passionate on all this and more. He was uncompromisingly anti-war and denounced America’s “war on terror.” The country “hijacked by a small cabal of individuals....unelected and unresponsive to public pressure.” The Democrats supporting them “in a gutless display of false patriotism.” The entire power structure characterizing Muslims as enemies. Passing repressive laws. Creating the obscenity of Guantanamo and other prisons like it.

Their self-righteous sophistry of so-called “just wars” and evil of Islam. The near omnipotence of the Zionist Lobby, Christian fascists, and military-industrial complex. Their hostility to Arabs and claim to be “on the side of the angels.” Their inexorable pursuit of war and power. The media in lockstep supporting “hypocritical lies” masquerading as “absolute truth.” The silencing of dissent. Of mocking and betraying democracy. Of making a total sham of decency, humanity and justice. Of letting a few extremists create their own “fantasy world” to run the country for their own corrupted self-interest.

Said said it all, and ended one opinion piece as follows: “Jonathan Swift, thou shouldst be living at this hour.” But even he might have blanched in disbelief considering the current state and potential horror of its consequences. Said understood. He’s sorely missed when we need him most.

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