

The Moral Failure of American Liberals: A Defence of Helen Thomas

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Global Research, June 11, 2010

11 June 2010

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The ostracism of Helen Thomas, the doyenne of the White House press corps, over her comment that Jews should “get the hell out of Palestine” and “go home” to Poland, Germany, America and elsewhere is revealing in several ways. In spite of an apology, the 89-year-old has been summarily retired by the Hearst newspaper group, dropped by her agent, spurned by the White House, and denounced by long-time friends and colleagues.

Ms Thomas earned a reputation as a combative journalist, at least by American standards, with a succession of administrations over their Middle East policies, culminating in Bush officials boycotting her for her relentless criticisms of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. But the reaction to her latest remarks suggest that, if there is one topic in American public life on which the boundaries of what can and cannot be said are still tightly policed, it is Israel.

Undoubtedly, Ms Thomas’ opinions, as she expressed them in an unguarded moment, were inappropriate and required an apology. It is true, as she says, that Palestine was occupied and the land taken from the Palestinians by Jewish immigrants with no right to it barring a Biblical title deed. But 62 years on from Israel’s creation, most Jewish citizens have no home to go to in Poland and Germany — or in Iraq and Yemen, for that matter. There is also an uncomfortable echo in her words of the chauvinism underpinning demands from some Jews — and many Israelis — that Palestinians should “go home to the 22 Arab states”.

But Ms Thomas did apologise and, after that, a line ought to have been drawn under the affair — as it surely would have been had she made any other kind of faux pas. Instead, she has been denounced as an anti-Semite, even by her former friends.

The reasoning of one, Lanny Davis, counsel to the White House in the Clinton administration, was typical. Mr Davis, who said he previously considered himself “a close friend”, asked whether anyone would be “protective of Helen’s privileges and honors if she had been asking Blacks to return to Africa, or Native Americans to Asia and South America, from which they came 8,000 or more years ago?”

It is that widely accepted analogy, appropriating the black and Native American experience in a wholly misguided way, that reveals in stark fashion the moral failure of American liberals. In their blindness to the current relations of power in the US, most critics of Ms Thomas contribute to the very intolerance they claim to be challenging.

Ms Thomas is an Arab-American, of Lebanese descent, whose remarks were publicised in

the immediate wake of Israel's lethal commando attack on a flotilla of aid ships trying to break the siege of Gaza. Unlike most Americans, who were half-wakened from their six-decade Middle East slumber by the killing of at least nine Turkish activists, Ms Thomas has been troubled by the Palestinians' plight for much of her long lifetime.

She was in her late twenties when Israel ethnically cleansed three-quarters of a million Palestinians from most of Palestine, a move endorsed by the fledgling United Nations. She was in her mid-forties when Israel took over the rest of Palestine and parts of Egypt and Syria in a war that dealt a crushing blow to Arab identity and pride and made Israel a favoured ally of the US. In her later years she has witnessed Israel's repeated destruction of Lebanon, her parents' homeland, and the slow confinement and erasure of the neighbouring Palestinian people. Both have occurred under a duplicitious American "peace process" while Washington has poured hundreds of billions of dollars into Israel's coffers.

It is therefore entirely understandable if, despite her own personal success, she feels a simmering anger not only at what has taken place throughout her lifetime in the Middle East but also at the silencing of all debate about it in the US by the Washington elites she counted as friends and colleagues.

While she has many long-standing Jewish friends in Washington — making the anti-Semite charge implausible — she has also seen them and others promote injustice in the Middle East. Doubtless she, like many of us, has been exasperated at the toothless performance of the press corps she belongs to in holding the White House to account in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine.

It is with this context in mind that we can draw a more fitting analogy. We should ask instead: How harshly should Ms Thomas be judged were she a black professional who, seeing yet another injustice like the video of Rodney King being beaten to within an inch of his life by white policemen, had said white Americans ought to "go home to Europe"?

This analogy accords more closely with the reality of power relations in the US between Arabs and Jews. Ms Thomas is not a representative of the oppressor white man disrespecting the oppressed black man, as Mr Davis suggests; she is the oppressed black man hitting back at the oppressor. Her comments shocked not least because they denied an image that continues to dominate in modern America of the vulnerable Jew, a myth that persists even as Jews have become the most successful minority in the country.

Ms Thomas let her guard down and her anger and resentment show. She generalised unfairly. She sounded bitter. She needed to — and has — apologised. But she does not deserve to be pilloried and blacklisted.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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