

Missing connections

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 14, 1999](#) issue

If you want to understand why Americans are largely indifferent to the plight of the Palestinians, consider the focus of two recent news stories. The first was about a press conference with President Clinton and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at which Clinton offered broad support to Palestinian "aspirations" and said flatly that Palestinians should be free to live "wherever they like." The second was about a bulldozer that was clearing a road near the walled Old City of Jerusalem. The bulldozer crashed into a hole, unearthing ancient masonry in a site that dates to the first century B.C. and provides "physical proof of ritual purity laws described in the Bible," according to the Associated Press account.

What's significant about these two stories is the fact that they were not linked to each other. Rest assured that the bulldozers working next to the Old City of Jerusalem are not building farm-to-market roads for Palestinians. Road projects in and around Jerusalem are designed to establish Jewish settlements that will guarantee Israeli control of the city and its environs. The AP story about the bulldozer serves to remind Westerners that Jerusalem was "the center of Jewish religion and ritual" from 515 B.C. at the time of the building of the Second Temple until the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Chalk up another media victory for future Israeli control of the Old City. Forget about all those centuries when the city was under Muslim control. History is written by current winners.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, President Mubarak, in lockstep with all visiting Arab leaders to this country, trotted out the now futile demand that Israel suspend the building of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza because "such actions . . . create an erosion of the people's confidence in the [peace] process at a time when we are working hard to encourage the parties to take confidence-building measures." Noble words, but not even the defeat of Benjamin Netanyahu by the Labor Party's more moderate Ehud Barak will change the intensity of settlement construction. For even as Barak was forming his new government, construction continued on a new 132-unit housing settlement financed by U.S. millionaire Irving Moskowitz in an Arab neighborhood in east Jerusalem. Ground was broken for the construction on May 18,

one day after Barak defeated Netanyahu. The former prime minister, who is close to Moskowitz, had strongly supported the construction project, but had withheld approval until after the election. After Netanyahu lost, the bulldozers began their work, posing a problem for the new prime minister, who has pledged not to support new settlement projects. Will the Moskowitz development be adjudged new or old by the Barak administration? Few Palestinians believe Moskowitz's project will be halted.

Meanwhile, President Clinton said "the best way for the Israelis to have lasting security is a negotiated peace based on mutual respect . . . [and it is also] the best way for Palestinians to shape their own future on their own land." Mutual respect, however, requires mutual negotiating partners, which is most certainly not the case with the Palestinians and the Israelis. The president was somewhat defensive when he asserted that "no one can accuse me of dodging Middle East questions. I've been up to my ears and eyeballs in this peace process since the day I took office."

That is true, but it is also true that the president has done nothing to halt the rapid reduction of Palestinian land, on which Israel continues to build and expand its settlements. During 1998, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, at least 4,000 housing units were begun in the West Bank and Gaza (that doesn't include the units built in East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights). This "settlement expansion comprised 9 per cent of all residential construction in Israel." The Foundation for Middle East Peace reports that "Israel has expropriated more than 5,845 acres of mostly Palestinian-owned land—one-third of East Jerusalem—for the construction of ten major Israeli settlement neighborhoods . . . with a population approaching 200,000," which now ring "almost the entire northern, eastern and southern perimeter of the city."

Few strong voices have been raised to push Clinton's Middle East policy in a different direction. His advisers in the White House and State Department have been exclusively pro-Israel. Political money and voting power does not come from Arab-Americans in crucial primary states. Indeed, as students of the election process will recall, it wasn't too long ago that one Democratic candidate for president returned a financial contribution he had received from an Arab-American organization because—this was during those old "Palestinian terrorist" propaganda days—the organization was too "controversial."

It is not stretching historical parallels too far to note that the U.S. defeat of Native Americans was carried out by a military force which developed, and then defended, expanding "settlements" with a ruthless finality that drew only scattered protests from an American public intrigued by heroic stories of its pioneers who "conquered the west."

Clinton's words are hopeful: "Palestinians should be free to live wherever they like." But *should* is not *will*. Ask the Native Americans.