

Blind eye: The assault on Jenin

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

Secretary of State Colin Powell's slow journey to Jerusalem gave Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon an extra week to continue his military assault on the Palestinian West Bank. If that was the purpose of his meandering schedule, Powell need not have bothered. Sharon still repudiated President Bush's demand that he pull out his forces immediately. Instead of repeating the Bush ultimatum, Powell visited the site of a suicide bombing in Israel and then turned his ire on Yasir Arafat, forcing Arafat to condemn all suicide bombing as the price tag for getting a representative of American power to visit him in his besieged compound.

Powell's trip to his meeting with Arafat took him through the devastated streets of Ramallah, but he did not travel to the Jenin refugee camp, a place where the death and destruction makes the recent suicide bombings in Israel pale in comparison. When Israelis point to the horror of bombs going off in their public places, Palestinians can respond that Israeli bombs, bullets and bulldozers attack them in their homes.

If ever there was a smidgen of doubt as to the United States' lack of neutrality as a broker in this conflict, Powell's behavior has removed it. He is demonstrating what Israeli journalist Amira Hass calls the "profound contempt" that Israeli leadership feels toward the Palestinian people. Even if you knew nothing about this conflict—and sadly, many Americans know only what they see in daily news reports—you might still wonder why Powell didn't make it to Jenin.

He will regret not having done so, if for no other reason than to have protected himself in the historical record. In time, the depth of Jenin's suffering will be exposed, even though the American media have thus far been slow to examine this suffering, and have been given permission to avoid examining it by a president who says that when absolute evil attacks absolute good, then absolute good is free to respond in whatever way it chooses with massive military force.

Yes, profound contempt describes how American political leaders and their pro-Israeli media cheerleaders view the Palestinians. The politicians have forgotten,

however, that it is not in the nature of the American public to ignore widespread suffering. If Jenin had been struck by a natural earthquake, instead of by an American-sanctioned and financed Israeli army onslaught, the American people would have been first in line with sympathy and support.

At first the Israeli army blocked all media access to the camp, though early reports have begun to reveal the suffering caused by what Sharon calls his search for the “terrorist infrastructure.” No doubt there were fighters and militants in Jenin, a permanent camp in which around 13,000 people live in a one-square-kilometer area. But the Israeli helicopters and tanks and bulldozers that sought to kill a few militants destroyed a crowded camp. Forty-two per cent of the camp’s residents were children, and many people were over the age of 65.

Justin Huggler reports on the Jenin carnage in the *London Independent*:

A woman with her leg all but ripped off by a helicopter rocket, the mangled remains hanging on a thread of skin as she slowly bleeds to death. A 10-year-old boy lying dead in the street, his arm blown off and a great hole in his side. A mother shot dead when she ran into the street to scream for help for her dying son. The wounded left to die slowly, in horrible agony, because the ambulances were not allowed to treat them.

Veteran Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery calls Sharon’s justification for his invasion—“to destroy the terrorist infrastructure”—“nonsensical.” That infrastructure, he says, “exists in the souls of millions of Palestinians and tens of millions of Arabs, whose hearts are bursting with rage. . . . When dozens of wounded people lie around in the streets and slowly bleed to death, because the army shoots at every moving ambulance, it creates terrible hatred. . . . A Palestinian child who sees all this with his eyes becomes the suicide bomber of tomorrow. Thus Sharon . . . creates the terrorist infrastructure.”

Phil Reeves, in the *London Independent*, spoke with “Joel, a reserve captain in the Israeli army.” (Israel has a policy of not identifying its military personnel to the press.) Reeves writes that Joel “has a warm handshake and a line of rapid-fire patter that betrays his New York upbringing. He introduces himself as a ‘military source’ but it swiftly emerges that he is a headline machine, churning out slurs.”

Israel is conducting a “multimillion dollar propaganda drive” designed to prevent backlash over its invasion. Joel told Reeves, “Believe me, we would love to let you

guys into Jenin, but unlike the Palestinian terrorists we respect the dignity of the dead. They want to gather up the bodies and show them off to the international media as evidence of a massacre that is typical of the sort of PR tricks they play.”

Powell eventually expressed concern over the humanitarian situation in the Jenin refugee camp and called on Israeli forces to “refrain from the excessive use of force” on the West Bank. That is diplomatic language for winking at a friend.

The two Bush administration spokespersons carrying the Israeli banner in this conflict, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, are African-American. They must know something of what it means to be held by others in profound contempt. That experience should produce wisdom, empathy and compassion. So far it hasn't.