

Road map charade: Palestinian Bantustans

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

White House spin masters have discovered the beauty of the sea. First there was the decision to hold an aircraft carrier offshore long enough for President Bush to stage his dramatic landing attired in a flight suit. Then there were the meetings at Sharm el Sheik and Aqaba, where President Bush posed in front of blue skies and blue waters as he admonished Middle Eastern leaders to follow the yellow “road map” to find the wizard of peace.

Karl Rove, Bush’s chief spin master, knows that the truth is not a problem in selling this president to the American public. It even looks as if the White House has learned that it can tweak the color code depicting terrorist danger to fit the news of the day: When the president is resting in Texas, jack up the threat; when he is on stage performing in front of a seaside backdrop, lower the threat.

Nor is there much concern that we haven’t found any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Why should we worry about having been deceived into going to war? Foreign-policy columnist Thomas Friedman assures us that deception is not a problem. We took out a bad guy, after all—so quit fussing about the truth. So what if we were lied to. What difference does it make?

Truth is fast becoming irrelevant in a media-controlled society. Sammy Sosa’s use of a corked bat and Martha Stewart’s questionable stock trading are greeted with greater moral outrage than is our government’s deception. We thrive on reality TV programs that are faked. Reality is whatever looks good.

There are those without power, however, who exist in a reality without beautiful pictures. For example, you would not have known it from most American media, but death and destruction continued in Palestine even as those high-level handshakes were exchanged at Sharm el Sheik and Aqaba.

Writing from Jerusalem for the *London Guardian*, Conal Urquhart reported that on the day that “George Bush talked about peace with the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers, Israeli soldiers were raiding the refugee camp of Balata and the city of Nablus for the third day . . . according to the Red Crescent, some 50 [Palestinian] people have been treated for bullet and shrapnel wounds in two days.”

Samir Abu Zarur, head of the casualty department at the Nablus hospital, said that in the raid on Balata, the largest refugee camp in the West Bank, 12 of the injured were children, including one eight-year-old shot in the face. The Aqaba handshakes will not change the fact that Israel will continue to use “security” as a rationale for doing whatever it wants to do to further punish and isolate the Palestinian people.

Before the road map meetings began, Hasan Abu Nimah, former Jordanian ambassador to the United Nations, wrote in the *Jordan Times* that the road map would be discussed with “a total absence of a common language for interparty communication.” Occupation and “right of return” are phrases, he noted, that mean completely different things to Palestinians and Israelis. Defining the precise meaning of those terms should be in the hands of a neutral broker—presumably, the American president. But is President Bush neutral? Few Palestinians believe he is.

In the months ahead, the American media, with White House prodding, will define the success or failure of the road map according to whatever definition Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dictates. Does anyone remember that in February of 2002 Bush told Sharon he had to “leave now” those Palestinian cities that he had just invaded? Sharon did not comply. The Christian right bombarded the White House with telegrams, and there were no more White House mandates to Sharon.

In the leadup to the road map meetings, Sharon showed himself to be a master linguist. First he said the unsayable word: “occupation.” The next day he adjusted the term to fit the official Israeli line that the West Bank and Gaza are not “occupied” but “disputed.” What the prime minister meant, said a spokesman, is that the *people* are occupied—not the land. It was an absurd linguistic twist, but who noticed?

Sharon accepted “contiguity” as a road map term, implying linkages between the series of bantustans that Israel envisions for a future Palestinian state. Bantustans, a form of ethnic segregation which failed to bring peace to South Africa, would confine Palestinian population centers within pockets of land, surrounding them with high

walls.

What did Sharon mean by “contiguity”? Maybe he was thinking of a connection by Israeli-controlled roads, but more likely he meant nothing, because he knows that he can always rely on the inevitable “terrorist” attack from Hamas to end the road map process. Sharon, the architect of the settlement movement, also agreed to remove settlements built without government approval, by which he means a few scattered trailer camps perched on mountains deep inside the West Bank. As every nation except the U.S. and Israel acknowledges, under international law all Israeli settlements on occupied land are illegal, not just the isolated trailers.

Having Sharon as a peace ally will not be easy. So it was a wise move when Bush selected Condoleezza Rice to be his personal representative on Palestinian-Israeli affairs. Before coming to the White House, Rice was Stanford University’s provost. For seven years she dealt with warring faculty fiefdoms. Her experience in the trenches of academic warfare should serve her well in her new assignment.