

Port paranoia: The Dubai deal

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

Congressional leaders from both parties responded quickly to White House approval of a deal that allows Dubai Ports World company, owned by the United Arab Emirates, to control shipping operations in New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, New Jersey, Baltimore and Miami. A few days later, Congress woke up to the reality that corporate takeovers are commonplace in our global economy. Most were convinced that the impact on local operations would be minuscule, but to save face they demanded a 45-day delay to study the impact. James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, had a different response: “When you have members of Congress literally tripping over themselves to run to a microphone . . . saying, ‘The Arabs are coming, the Arabs are coming,’ preying off that fear because [the UAE is] an Arab country, that constitutes bigotry.”

Congressional leaders tried to link the UAE to terrorism, reporting that two of the 9/11 hijackers were from the UAE—and failing to add that 15 of the other hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, a staunch ally and business partner.

The negative responses to the DPW deal are an excuse to curry favor with a public that has been persuaded that the world is locked in a clash of civilizations. This clash theory has lost favor in some intellectual circles now that Iraq has become such a political and human disaster. But although it’s a simplistic and incorrect response to the horrors of 9/11, some politicians and journalists still find the clash to be a convenient theory, one that hides other motives.

In his book *Devil’s Game*, Robert Dreyfuss writes that the clash theory “sees President Bush’s war on terrorism not as a struggle against Al Qaeda and its radical allies, but as a titanic struggle pitting Judeo-Christian civilization against the Muslim world.”

This “titanic struggle” is an attempt to find a replacement for the cold war, to provide a fearful public with an imaginary struggle against a clearly defined enemy. It is, however, a dangerous fiction. “The enemy that attacked the United States on September 11 was not Islam, nor was it Islamic fundamentalism, nor was it the

Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, Hamas, or any other group of violence-prone militants on the Islamic right,” writes Dreyfuss. “ Rather, it was Al Qaeda . . . [which] does not pose an existential threat to the United States.”

Yet the purported clash of civilizations continues to shape public rhetoric. We see it when Western leaders reject political decisions reached by Arabic and Muslim people because the decisions are not what we wanted. According to the racism inherent in this theory, Arabs and Muslims must rely on enlightened Western nations to tell them what is best for them. We see it in the fear that Iraq will become a religiously dominated state, and we see it in the response by the U.S. and Israel to the Hamas victory. Only a sense of racial superiority can explain this response, although it's always disguised as a need to maintain national security.

Peace activists in Israel joke about the close-knit U.S.-Israeli partnership. “Why is Israel not interested in becoming the 51st U.S. state? Because it already has 100 senators—why settle for two?”

Israeli columnist Gideon Levy finds humor of a darker sort when he writes in *Ha'aretz* about a recent meeting of Israel's “Hamas team,” headed by the prime minister's adviser Dov Weissglas and including “the Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, the director of the Shin Bet and senior generals and officials.” Weissglas convened the team to discuss responses to the Hamas election victory with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. Writes Levy:

Everyone agreed on the need to impose an economic siege on the Palestinian Authority, and Weissglas, as usual, provided the punch line: “It's like an appointment with a dietitian. The Palestinians will get a lot thinner, but won't die,” the adviser joked, and the participants reportedly rolled with laughter.

Weissglas's wisecrack was in particularly poor taste. Like the thunder of laughter it elicited, it again revealed the extent to which Israel's intoxication with power drives it crazy and completely distorts its morality. With a single joke, the successful attorney and hedonist from Lilenblum Street, Tel Aviv, demonstrated the chilling heartlessness that has spread throughout the top echelon of Israel's society and politics.

Gideon Levy fears for his nation. “The recommendation for a ‘diet,’ along with the edicts Israel is poised to impose on the Palestinian people, should have aroused a hue and cry among Israeli society. . . . Where do we get the right to abuse an entire people this way? Is it only because of our great power and the fact that the U.S. allows us to run wild and do whatever we want?”

In Steven Spielberg’s film *Munich*, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir is shown setting up an assassination team to kill Palestinian leaders following the deaths of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics. She remarks, “Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values.”

Israeli writers like Gideon Levy and filmmakers like Spielberg warn us of what happens when a nation compromises its values and distorts its own morality. U.S. political leaders do just that when they denounce a corporate business deal just because the corporation is run by Arabs. Bigotry like that aimed at Jews is rightly called anti-Semitism. What do we call it when the target is Arabic?