

# Media bias

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

In *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith argues for the importance of having and articulating a worldview. "Life's problems press so heavily on us that we seldom take time to reflect on the way our unconscious attitudes and assumptions about the nature of things affect the way we perceive what is directly before us."

Smith goes on to quote John Stuart Mill's perceptive comment, "If it were not useful to know in what order of things, under what government of the universe it is our destiny to live, it is difficult to imagine what could be considered so, for whether a person is in a pleasant or unpleasant place, a palace or a prison, it cannot be otherwise than useful to him to know where he is."

Perspective and worldview are crucial to understanding how we react to political realities. At the moment, few issues are as fraught with the burden of limited worldviews as is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Robert Fisk, Jerusalem-based writer for the *Independent* newspaper (London), recently came under heavy media attack when he wrote, "No newspaper in America, except for some very small ones, now dares to put the Palestinian side of the case. They are all in thrall to Israel, and the chief reason why they are in such an ignominious position is that the Israeli lobby has succeeded in equating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism."

During the recent Washington visit by Ariel Sharon, Israel's new prime minister, only cursory reference was made to Sharon's role in the 1983 Sabra and Shatila massacres. Yet he resigned as Israel's defense minister after a commission held that the Israeli army was "indirectly" responsible for at least 800 (Palestinian sources report 2,000) civilian deaths. Friends don't rain on the parade of friends.

As he was warmly received by Jewish-American leaders, members of Congress and President George W. Bush, Sharon continued to insist that he will not engage in negotiations with the Palestinians until "the violence stops." Because Israel has succeeded in establishing itself as the victim in this conflict, violence continues to be defined as Palestinians attacking Israelis. There is no reference to the contextual reality: military occupation, with its besieged cities and road closures, constitutes a

systemic violence that in any other country would be denounced as an excessive response to either the provocation or perceived threats to Israel's security.

American media continue to repeat the Israeli argument that Yasir Arafat contributed to Sharon's political return by turning down a "generous peace offer" from Sharon's predecessor. From a Palestinian perspective, this offer was anything but generous since it would have formalized Israel's illegal settlements, kept Jerusalem largely under Israeli control, and assured Israeli military control over Palestinian cities and villages. It was a deal former President Clinton tried to force on Arafat, and one that no Arab leader would allow Arafat to accept. But to the American media, it was "generous."

Coverage of Sharon's visit did reveal that more than 400 Palestinians have died and thousands more been wounded during the current *intifada*, but these reports were couched in the Israeli worldview that Palestinians are dying because of Arafat's failure to stop the "terrorist" acts of his people. "Terrorism" has become a racist term that demonizes any aggressive action against Israel's occupation.

By ignoring the systemic violence of its own illegal activities and denouncing its opponents as terrorists, Israel and the media that embrace Israel's perspective largely block any expression of a Palestinian worldview so that it doesn't reach the American public. This provides a short-term gain in American public opinion, but in the long run it is doomed to failure. More than 2 million Palestinians will not tolerate a future without freedom in a collection of besieged cities surrounded by the world's fourth largest military army.

Within Israel there is a debate between security-minded citizens who embrace Sharon's tough tactics and those Israelis who know that their government's settlement policy will bring nothing but continued violent responses from Palestinians. This internal Israeli debate is existential because families face the daily threat of explosions on their buses and city streets, and know that their soldiers are dying in defense of settlements that many agree are illegal and nonproductive. There is no comparable debate over Israel's future within the United States, and there will not be one as long as the Israeli perspective dominates our media.

Israeli and Palestinian children continue to die from the violence. Worldviews do have life-and-death consequences. Think about that the next time you listen to Daniel Schorr and those reports from Jerusalem on National Public Radio, or read Thomas Friedman and William Safire in the *New York Times*. These journalists have a

worldview, and it is not a Palestinian worldview.