

Friends like these: Friendship can mislead us

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

When the *New York Times* admitted that its reporting on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction came from unsupported allegations, it did so not on page one, where all the dire predictions about WMDs had appeared, but on page ten. This is a quiet mea culpa.

Even after the invasion of Iraq, *Times* WMD "expert" Judith Miller continued to assure the American public that we were fighting this war in order to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. We now know that much of Miller's misinformation was coming from allies of Ahmad Chalabi and from false reports confirmed by U.S. officials—the same sources.

What we have here is not just a failure to communicate, but a subconscious desire to miscommunicate. Why would the *New York Times*, which over the years has done magnificent work uncovering government misconduct, make such a mistake? It may well be that future historians will conclude that the *Times* had a vested interest in believing what it should not have believed.

Israel's leaders have often joked that life for their people would have been easier if Moses had turned east, where there is plenty of oil, instead of west, where there is none, when he reached the river Jordan at the end of his wilderness trek out of Egypt. From its creation in 1948 through the Six-Day War in 1967, an oil-deprived Israel struggled to accommodate its new status as a nation and was not a factor in U.S. strategic planning. But after 1967, Israel emerged as a powerful military ally, on call as needed. With the Iraq war and its occupation aftermath, the White House looked for help with an Arab opponent. "Who you gonna call?"

Robert Fisk of the *London Independent* offers this answer: "The actual interrogators accused of encouraging U.S. troops to abuse Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib jail were working for at least one company with extensive military and commercial contacts with Israel. The head of an American company whose personnel are implicated in

the Iraqi tortures, it now turns out, attended an ‘anti-terror’ training camp in Israel and, earlier this year, was presented with an award by Shaul Mofaz . . . the Israeli defense minister.”

Friendship can mislead us. When the *New York Times* delivered false information to its readers, it placed friendship above serious and responsible journalism. The *Times* was no doubt influenced by its belief that so long as Saddam Hussein was in power and making threatening gestures toward Israel, the whole region was in danger. Hussein was a wicked dictator whom the United States supported during his ten-year war against Iran, a conflict in which Hussein committed some of his worst atrocities against enemies and his own citizens. But was he really that big a threat either to the U.S. or to the region?

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has always been rooted in the need to protect the region’s rich oil fields, first from the Soviet Union during the cold war, and now from unreliable local dictators like Hussein. (For reliable dictatorships, see Saudi Arabia.) Our support for Israel is consistent with the realization that in a region where allies are not always under your control, you need a strong military friend. And unlike any of the Arab states, Israel has a strong political support base in the U.S., a reality of domestic politics that is never far from the reelection strategies of American politicians.

But it is hard to ignore the reality—though U.S. media do what they can to soft-pedal it—that Israel has conducted a stifling four-decade-long military occupation of land that belongs to the Palestinians. Israel keeps electing political leaders like Ariel Sharon, who have no desire to end that occupation until most of the occupied land permanently becomes part of Israel. This puts the U.S. in the position of having to defend the indefensible.

Until 9/11 it seemed that the U.S. might be able to persuade Israel to end its illegal occupation. But when terror became the U.S. foreign policy focus, Sharon quickly linked his fight against Palestinians to the U.S. fight against worldwide terrorism. Resistance to occupation is not terrorism, of course, but U.S. politicians of both parties embraced the word of a friend and agreed that the situations were similar. It was an easy call. Both the resistance and the terror had come from people who speak Arabic and the majority of whom follow the Islamic faith.

Which is how racism—the blanket condemnation of a racial group for ulterior purposes—enters the picture and emerges as the subtext of Middle East policy. That subtext worked rather well—hidden racism always plays well in American politics—until Abu Ghraib revealed U.S. racism through digital photographs and videos. Our political leaders rushed to deplore the “sexual nature” of those photos. Opposing sexual misconduct also plays well in American politics.

Are we to expect at least a quiet mea culpa from our political leaders? For an answer, look no further than the first of six planned speeches President Bush delivered to a nation that had just seen pictures of U.S. torture and learned of possible murders at Abu Ghraib: “Under the dictator [Saddam Hussein] prisons like Abu Ghraib were symbols of death and torture. That same prison became a symbol of disgraceful conduct by a few American troops who dishonored our country and disregarded our values. America will fund the construction of a modern maximum security prison.”

No mea culpa there. No assuming of responsibility for torture either. And if we know anything about Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, there will be no digital cameras allowed in that new state-of-the-art Iraqi prison.