

It's a small world after all – in so many ways

by Chibli Mallat

Consider the following statement: "We do not want the deputies of south Lebanon to blindly serve a community against another community, a person against another person, a region against another region. We are not asking them to make of Jabal Amel another America."

This was written in 1947 by a Lebanese Muslim religious leader, commonly known as "Ayatollah" Mohammed Jawad Mughniyeh. Mughniyeh, a respected Muslim scholar who died in 1979, came from south Lebanon, another name for the upper Galilee, or Jabal Amel, which has been under Israeli occupation for 22 years.

The continuation of what he wrote went as follows: "We want Jabal Amel to be an integral part of Lebanon with its rights and duties, so that the schools of Jabal Amel compare with the schools of Lebanon, its roads with Lebanon's roads and its hospitals with Lebanon's hospitals."

So here was a venerable religious leader from the Shiite community, depicting the United States, over a half century ago, as an Eldorado to which he does not expect his homeland to compare.

What went wrong? How can one account for the gulf between a dream articulated in the middle of the century which used America as a fine example, and at the century's end, the chants of the dreamer's successors wishing "death to America" on any public occasion?

Surely there are many reasons, not least Israel's occupation of the south, Tel Aviv's sacred alliance with Washington, the continued economic depression in the region, in addition to the failures of Lebanese politicians to extricate the south from political and economic misery.

Such a history-bound vision is important for regional Middle Eastern politics.

But let us suspend our disbelief and put aside the historical and political reasons behind the dramatic shift in perception between 1947 and 2000. The citation figures here for a different purpose, which is that the venerable ayatollah's 1947 dream shared with the rest of the world a vision of America as a model of advancement.

How to reclaim the lost vision of America as Eldorado is what the attention of a US

president should be directed toward, and the way America should project itself abroad.

The answer is simple enough. The projection of the US abroad must be sustained by universal values which the American citizen shares with everyone else.

The people of the United States, steeped as they are in their own culture and language, may not always readily appreciate other cultures. The debate between universal human-rights and cultural relativism has surfaced frequently whether on the subject of environmental rights in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, women's rights in Beijing in 1995, or crimes against humanity as defined in Rome in 1998. Human-rights are presupposed and accepted as the common values of humankind.

This must therefore constitute the established departing position of any American foreign policy: no human should be denied universal rights under the pretext of cultural relativism.

An enlightened president of the United States should recognize these universal values, and discourage leaders elsewhere who try to reject them under some national or cultural pretext. But there is a different, subtler,

shape to cultural relativism. Since the end of the Cold War the balance of power has allowed the rise of unrest and violence, and a sense of chaos in international relations which some have tried to understand as "a clash of civilizations," notably Western, Muslim, and Chinese-Confucian, and one can do little to overcome those fractures and gaps.

A simplistic view of the clash of civilizations usually reinforces the thesis of cultural relativism: civilizations, the argument goes, are laden with incompatible values which make their clash a reality. Since any change in civilizations is slow, there is an argument that it is better to leave each country and region to its civilization, even if it violates democracy and basic human-rights; leave the Chinese people to any cruelty and repression that their government chooses to mete out to them.

Proponents of universal values, especially regarding basic human rights, cannot accept that theory. There may be a more constructive way to approach the problem, which finds its root and justification in what is known as "the right to be different." Here

is the way to respond to the positive charge of the clash of civilizations: while basic human values are shared by every individual on Earth, the form of expressing these values within that individual's culture and language must be respected and encouraged. In the spread of cultural expressions lies the adaptation, protection, and enrichment of these values worldwide.

From a cultural point of view, US presidential choices are better served by a number of domestic and foreign-policy measures which help the healthy proliferation of these values.

One is the transformation of the United States from a mono-linguistic society into one that is more polyglot. A troubling aspect of American society is the poor standard of literacy in the people's mother tongue, be it English or Spanish. In an age of globalization, with English the dominant language, an extra effort is needed to make sure that American children are educated in more than one language.

This should not be hard to defend. One of the few incontrovertible values of education is an apprenticeship in other languages.

While the US is slowly adapting to the enriching addition of Spanish to its language pattern, a more diversified hue of languages taught early at school, and encouraged throughout education, would erode concerns abroad and foster a better understanding among Americans of the rest of the world.

It would also show the rest of the world, which can hardly survive without mastering the new universal language, that English is not a tool of supremacy and that Americans are making an effort to understand them.

Beyond the push for foreign languages, a new president should redirect political talk inside America and beyond toward the great tradition of Henry Cabot Lodge, Woodrow Wilson, Abraham Lincoln, and Alexander Hamilton, who thought for themselves. Presidents should allow themselves some distance from their speechwriters and learn to choose their words carefully and imaginatively: carefully, by conveying to their audience the value of proper wording and imaginatively by rediscovering the infinitely creative power of language in everyday life.

A third approach in the search for multicultural basic values is what is sometimes

described as the universal library. Enlightened institutions, such as Yale University Law School, which makes available any Western treaty or declaration of importance in modern history through the Avalon project www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm or Massachusetts Institute Technology's presentation of more than 400 classical works at www.classics.mit.edu, or Shakespeare's writings at www.shakespeare.com, have made important corpuses available in full.

With the easy access the internet provide and America's position as a world leader in technology, a visionary American president better equipped than anyone else (save perhaps the UN secretary-general) to place significant historical books within the reach of any reader in the world. Rather than build yet another presidential library, it would be good for the rest of us (and for Americans), if the next presidential library were universal.

With the universal library comes another American dream: equal opportunity. Of course, there remain much to be achieved before equal opportunities, equal justice, an equal benefits accord to the resident of Jabal Amel and others: less happy places. Culture will often come:

a distant second to economic injustice or political brutality.

Still, a new US president can make a she herd in Jabal Amel or a farmer in Sinkiang much happier. In no specific order of importance, he can help defend his or her universal basic rights, open access to education at technology with access to the internet and universal library, while at the same time showing respect for as much as 6,000 years civilization and its local mode of expression.

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