

ISRAEL'S TRAILS OF DECEPTION

The government's relationship with Palestinians has parallels with U.S. treatment of Indians

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For The Register-Guard

The history of modern Israel and its war with the Palestinians began with a historical struggle for control of inhabited lands. The history of the United States began with a similar struggle to dominate land controlled by Native Americans.

The language of force, the rhetoric of justification and the idiom of violence are strikingly analogous. Both histories reveal broken promises, trails of deception, asymmetrical force and indigenous populations pushed to the margins of society by the conquests.

No historical analogy is perfect. Indeed, the differences in the experiences of Native Americans and Palestinians are many and profound. The conquest of the Americas, for instance, was not accomplished by people who had a previous connection to the land, and Palestinians have a linguistic and cultural unity that Native Americans lacked. Geography, time and culture separate the two people.

Yet framing the plight of the Palestinian people within a historical experience more familiar to American readers should help illuminate the depth of their grievances and explain the ferocity of their resistance to Israeli occupation. Through the presentation of parallels, inexact though they may be, the desperation of the Palestinian people may become comprehensible.

One parallel is that of land claims based on religious ideology. Early in the 17th century, Protestant clergyman Richard Hakluyt called for settlement in the New World, exhorting Englishmen to "lay claim to the land and take it as our own." He argued that in order to gain a firm foothold, settlements and towns, rather than trading posts and forts (as the French had established), must be planted.

Like Hakluyt, Zionist leaders from David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first prime minister, 1948-53) to the current prime minister, Ariel Sharon, understood that possession of the land (through settlements) makes the difference.

Both the U.S. and Israeli governments relentlessly pursued aggressive policies of land acquisition and settlement at the expense of the indigenous populations. The driving force behind the dispossession of American Indians and Palestinians from their land is the myth of chosenness. It is this idea that inspired British colonial expansion and American Manifest Destiny, and which fueled Zionism in Palestine.

John Rolfe, one of the original founders of the Jamestown colony, noted that the colonists are "a peculiar people, marked and chosen by the finger of God, to possess (the land), for undoubtedly He is with us." And in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, founder John Winthrop spoke of the Puritan covenant with God and that "we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." The new nation internalized the idea of covenant and chosenness, which seems to play out in national policy even today.

The English colonists were committed early on to an exclusive and separate white state, and shunned a common life with the native peoples of America unless some of the latter converted to Christianity. Most early Zionist settlers were committed to a separate (Jewish) state, whose vision did not include the indigenous Muslim and Christian Palestinian population. This policy persists today, and Jews worldwide have the right of return to Israel — a right adamantly denied Palestinians by the Israeli government.

For Pilgrim and Puritan immigrants, North America was the Promised Land and they were God's chosen people. The Zionist state of Israel was built on the same set of beliefs. In both instances, the march of progress led to the often violent displacement of the indigenous populations.

How do conquerors explain conquest? The English

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and Zionists alike used myth, misrepresentation and caricature to explicate their takeover of inhabited land.

By the 19th century, Puritan beliefs of divine covenant and chosenness transformed into the American notion of Manifest Destiny, a term coined by New York journalist John O'Sullivan in 1845. He wrote that nothing must interfere with "fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." Land was to be theirs — theirs to exploit. It was seen as living proof that Americans were indeed God's chosen people. Indian people were viewed as a hindrance to the fulfillment of this destined goal of national expansion.

Manifest Destiny led to a history of broken treaties, forced assimilation and removal, war, reservations, boarding schools, poverty and despair. Indians who could not be removed, assimilated or silenced were slain. Settlers justified the taking of Indian land on the basis of nonuse and the "emptiness theory" — the heathen Indians merely passed over the land rather than fencing, farming and improving it.

Zionist immigrants similarly portrayed Palestine as an idyllic and empty land, ripe for the picking. It was said to be the duty of heroic Jewish settlers to make the "desert bloom," eschewing the fact of existing Palestinian villages and farms. Zionist myth-makers fostered an image of Palestinian Arabs as Bedouins having no sovereignty over the land.

In a 1969 interview, Golda Meir, a former American school teacher who was then Israel's prime minister, stated that there was no such thing as Palestinians — they do not exist.

No Native American was untouched by the settlers' unwavering sense of entitlement to the land, but the story of the Cherokee in what is called Georgia today is most illustrative in relation to the plight of Palestinians. The Cherokee had done their best to become white — they had assimilated, and most of the "tribe" was of mixed race. Some mixed-race Cherokee held slaves and started cotton plantations.

But to satisfy the settlers' lust for land, U.S. administrators, with the staunch support of President Andrew Jackson, set on transferring the Cherokee west of the Mississippi to Indian territory. Arbitrary decrees, false treaties and illegal settlements on tribal land led to the forced expulsion of the

Cherokee from their homeland.

The aim in the 1830s was to employ oppressive measures to break the spirit of the Cherokee who refused to leave their homes. The ultimate objective was to make them go away. Indians who had been promised economic security and sovereignty on the reservations, if they forfeited land, realized quickly that ultimate control remained firmly in U.S. government hands.

The same can be said of the "peace" negotiations brokered thus far in the Arab-Israeli war. In opposition to United Nations resolutions, Israeli settlements continue to be built in the West Bank and Gaza, while the Israeli government maintains control of every aspect of Palestinian life — transportation, movement, borders, employment, airspace and water.

The relationship between white settlers and Indians throughout the 19th century was based on war and conquest. Although they fought bravely, Indians were overwhelmed by the su-

perior power of the U.S. Army. Their defeat led to the loss of millions of acres of land and confinement to virtual prisons (reservations) spread across North America.

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Wars between the Jewish settlers and Palestinians have set the tone for their relationship since the creation of Israel in 1948. Israeli military might, provided and financed by the United States, has left Palestinians with tenuous authority over only 22 percent of the land they once inhabited.

By the late 1800s, virtually all Native Americans were confined to reservations, surrounded by hostile settlers and military forts. They had become economic dependents of the U.S. government. The 17th century Puritan ideology of chosenness and mission had set in motion the pretext for a historic land grab in North America.

So it is in the occupied territories and all of historic Palestine. The goal of late 19th century Zionism, as envisioned by Theodor Herzl and others, was a Jewish state. Though the leaders of the Zionist movement were essentially secular men, biblical references were used to settle upon Palestine. Even today Jewish nationalists aver that the Book of Genesis contains their ancient ancestors' deed to the land

from God. Religious ideology was harnessed to state power. Like the United States, the Israeli government has a clear policy of concentration and containment carried out through superior military power. The imbalance of power between occupier and the dispossessed has forced Palestinians onto reservationlike enclaves in the West Bank and Gaza. Like many Indian reservations, Gaza is one of the poorest and most squalid strips of land.

As in 19th century America, there are those Israelis — some in the current Israeli government — calling for the "transfer" or complete removal of Palestinians from their land. Palestinians live in these contained enclaves surrounded by hundreds of Jewish settlements with Israeli weapons pointed in their direction. While espousing peace, the Sharon government vigorously supports new settlements in the occupied territories, squeezing out the remaining Palestinians. Today there are more than 400,000 Israeli settlers in

the territories, most in settlements that violate United Nations resolutions.

A parallel land policy was undertaken by the U.S. Congress in 1887. Under the Dawes General Allotment Act (named for Sen. Henry Dawes of Massachusetts), communal tribal reservation lands were theoretically divided into small plots (160 acres) that were assigned to individual Indians. Tribes were strongly encouraged to adopt an allotment system for their reservations. Whatever land was left over could be sold to whites. By 1934, when the Allotment Act ended, about 90 million acres of 138 million acres had become white-owned.

Compare this to Palestine, where Palestinians have been temporarily allotted two small parcels (the West Bank and Gaza), about 22 percent of historic Palestine, over which they have no real authority. Their desire for a Palestinian state within the confines of the occupied territories remains illusory, largely due to continued Israeli control.

Palestinians who struggle against an oppressive occupation are labeled "terrorists," and Israeli acts of violence are termed "reprisals." Echoes of this can be heard when traveling

through the American West, where one observes that when the U.S. cavalry won a military engagement it was called a "battle." When the Indians won, it was a "massacre." In today's parlance, Geronimo would be called a terrorist.

Terrorism takes its ugliest form when it is sponsored by states. The asymmetrical military force of the U.S. army used against the Indians in its quest to secure land can be described as state-sponsored terrorism. Similarly, the Israeli government has used the asymmetrical power and force of the state and army to manage and contain the Palestinians. Targeted assassinations, retaliatory bulldozing of homes, military occupation, incarceration without trial are all state-sponsored forms of terrorism.

Like the English and their descendants in the United States, the Israelis have a difficult time explaining their right to the land of another. The notion of divine right to the land and its bounty is one aspect of the historical mythology of the United States, as it is for the state of Israel.

The cycle of violence in Israel and Palestine is a consequence of Israel's gaining land whose possession is seeded with injustice. The continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza will have long-term detrimental effects on the Israeli national character. Prime Minister Sharon recently admitted as much when he stated that occupation cannot continue as a viable policy into the future.

What kind of nation would the United States be today if our forebears had worked out terms mutually agreeable with the Indian people with regard to the land? There is time for Israel to ask this consequential question. Does the Israeli state want to be defined by its military dominance over the 3.5 million Palestinians living in the occupied territories, or by how it worked as an equal partner in arriving at a just and mutual agreement with the indigenous people of Palestine?

In addition, moral perceptions of land appropriation resonate in the political culture of the Islamic Middle East. If Jews can remember the exodus from Egypt and the Promised Land in their prayers, Muslims can be reminded of the dispossession of the Palestinians in their weekly prayers as well. Morality has its relation to power, and justice requires a new basis for memory.

If the Israeli state truly wants to live in peace with its neighbors, the rule of law must replace its mythic claims to the land.