

## AN 'OPTIMIST' IN THE MIDDLE EAST | By Jonathan Randal '51

For nearly 20 years, far-flung readers of the *International Herald Tribune* and leading Arab World newspapers have read the tireless suggestions of John Whitbeck '64 about furthering what euphemistically used to be called the Palestinian-Israeli "peace process." And while sometimes disagreeing with his views, they have come to respect his dogged efforts to find a way out of the unequal and intractable struggle in the Holy Land.

His silence over the past year reflects, I suspect, his sense of discouragement at the extremely messy events the Bush administration has created on the ground in the Middle East and the near-impossibility, even for a determined optimist, to find anything new, hopeful and constructive to propose.

Now in this slim volume, aptly entitled *The World According to Whitbeck* (Five and Ten Press; 2005), he has collected his well argued op-ed essays demonstrating what a long-optimistic American was convinced could constitute a fair deal in that quintessentially troubled corner of the Middle East. Most date from the coming to power of George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon in 2001. But also included are later versions of Whitbeck's "Two States, One Holy Land," his framework for peace and a "condominium solution" for sharing Jerusalem, first published in 1988.

The great pity is that these views constitute only *The World According to Whitbeck*, rather than the real world in the corridors of power, most especially in Washington where the fate of so many nations is decided. As a longtime foreign correspondent covering the Middle East, I confess that in the past I often found Whitbeck's writings overly sunny. (Frankly, I and many other observers abandoned hope for an equitable solution many years ago, when more than 100,000 Israelis were settled in the occupied West Bank. They now number in excess of 200,000.)

Taxing Whitbeck's optimism is not meant as criticism of this veteran lawyer who is extremely well acquainted with the Middle East and its often self-defeating complexities. He holds no brief for terrorism, be it the handiwork of Palestinians or the state of Israel. Rather, my doubts about Whitbeck's efforts reflected a working journalist's long foot-leather experience with the region, and the professional deformation that inevitably follows. Such proximity to accumulated events does little to encourage optimism.

In any case, lawyers and journalists have different missions. Whitbeck's rigorous logic bears witness to what an excellent legal mind could produce despite—and, perhaps more accurately, because of—the increasingly grim situation on the ground. A nonexhaustive list of depressing events includes Washington's hollow formal insistence that it serves as an honest broker between our Israeli allies and the increasingly landless Palestinians; American acquiescence to relentless Israeli encroachment on Palestinian land, culminating with the rescinding

of traditional U.S. opposition to Israeli settlements and the tacit approval of the wall that is now completing the isolation of Palestinians into Bantustans; and Bush's endorsement of Sharon as "my friend," despite the former Israeli prime minister's blood-spattered responsibility in the slaughter of hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camp during his ill-considered invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

In fact, Bush never really pushed hard for the independent Palestinian state he invoked in 2002 and the "road map" for getting there. He came into office in January 2001 determined to avoid the hands-on diplomacy on which Bill Clinton lavished so much time and effort towards the end of his presidency.

All this is ancient history, it might be argued, and so, too, is official Washington's often condescending agreement with that old Israeli chestnut: "The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Only our government, Congress and neoconservatives fail to see the despair with which almost all the rest of the world views U.S. policy in the Holy Land.

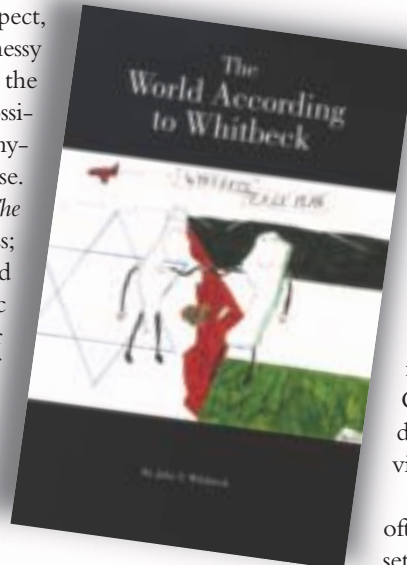
The great merit of Whitbeck's book is his calm, often dry legal language designed to find fair ways to settle this more than century-long crisis. To be called utopian is a badge of honor for an American who is one of the very few redeeming exceptions to so much sanctimonious official U.S. double-talk and double-dealing.

The stunning victory of the Hamas Islamists in the January Palestinian legislative elections, universally regarded as free and fair, served as a comeuppance not just for the corrupt Fatah incumbents but for the Bush administration as well. All the rhetoric about respecting a free vote proved to be just hot air when the results displeased Washington.

*Nota Bene:* Whitbeck readily acknowledges that at various times he has counseled the Palestinians in international negotiations. In so doing, he certainly incurred lasting enmities. Yet as this book makes clear, it is open to question how much advice the Palestinians took on board. But Whitbeck's compendium, if nothing else, durably exposes the very notion of "peace process" as hollow posturing tricked out in high-sounding words.

Whitbeck also has written about the president's global war on terrorism and the implications of the war he chose to wage in Iraq. Events now have borne out the forebodings of his clear-minded essays, events that finally have turned a majority of Americans against the wildest U.S. adventure ever in the Middle East. ■

Now retired from The Washington Post, Jonathan Randal '51 covered the Middle East for four decades. He is the author of *Osama, The Making of a Terrorist* (Knopf, 2004).



*The World According to Whitbeck is a collection of op-ed essays on the Middle East conflict by John Whitbeck '64.*



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