

11 April 1985

IGNORANCE AND PREJUDICE

SOME YEARS ago Eugene Rostow in an article in *Commentary* magazine made the astounding assertion that Transjordan had not been part of the British Mandate for Palestine. To all who know him it was incredible that Rostow would be interested in helping to smother the truth, internationally recognized, of the Jewish relationship to all of Palestine. Why then did he make such a statement?

Taken aback by the misstatement from so illustrious a source, Dr. Paul Riebenfeld, an eminent expert on Transjordan, communicated with Rostow and brought the facts to his notice.

Transjordan is Palestine no less than Cisjordan; and after the Balfour Declaration was issued, the British Government discussed with the Zionist leaders every detail of its eastern boundary.

Then, in 190-1921, events occurred – completely unrelated to the Jewish people – which resulted in a British betrayal of trust. The British had installed the Hedjazian, Hashemite leader, Feisal, as king of Syria; but the French had driven him out. Thereupon the British gave him the throne of Iraq. The Iraqi throne, however, had been promised to Feisal's brother, Abdallah, who was thus left throneless.

The solution stared out at the British. Transjordan (three-quarters of Palestine) lay there invitingly – and Abdallah had actually arrived there on his way, as he threatened, to go and fight the French in Syria. The British installed Abdallah, at first provisionally, but ultimately as its ruler.

Transjordan remained part and parcel of the Mandate; only it was excluded from the Jewish national home. The British added a hasty last-minute paragraph to the text of the Mandate. Its opening words provide the most striking testimony to this tangled skein of perfidy: “In the territories lying between the Jordan and *the eastern boundary of Palestine . . .*”

To complete the picture: the French had earlier relinquished a claim to Transjordan after the British had persuaded them that it was essential to the security of the future Jewish State.

PROFESSOR Rostow promptly wrote a second article in *Commentary*, admitting and correcting his error. He has since made a significant contribution to the debate on Palestine, most notably by demonstrating the absurdity of the charge that Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria is “illegal.”

The nagging question, however, remains. Professor Rostow is a legal luminary of world renown. Moreover, he was once a shaper of U.S. foreign policy, as under-secretary of state in the Johnson Administration. He could conceivably have influenced the future of Israel. How is it that a public figure of such influence was ignorant of an elementary fact of Palestine history – and thus unaware of some grim implications of Abdallah's later invasion of Western Palestine in 1948; and then of the effort of Abdallah's grandson, Hussein, using Judea and Samaria as a springboard, to wrest the last sliver of *Eretz Yisrael* from Jewish hands?

The case of Eugene Rostow is a classic illustration of the glaring errors of omission of Israel's information services ever since 1948. It also demonstrates, however, that it is not always ill-will that fuelled inimical U.S. policies towards Israel. It is often sheer ignorance in high places.

Professor Rostow's articles presumably were not read by Jimmy Carter, who subsequently became president of the U.S. In Jerusalem in 1979, his escort, Ariel Sharon, mentioned that Jordan had been part of the British mandate. Carter was astonished; and only when his adviser, Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski, confirmed it, did he accept the statement.

KNOWLEDGE of the origins of the east Palestinian state and its brief but aggressive history is manifestly essential for gaining a rational perspective of the Arab-Israeli conflict. King Hussein (and the Arabs in general) understand this; and they disseminate untiringly the fantasy that Jordan – carved out of the Jewish national home in 1922 and given independence by Britain in 1946 – is a state of long and honourable standing. Some 15 years ago Hussein had a record made of a speech for dissemination among Christian clergymen, in which he warned that the Christian holy places were endangered by Israeli rule. He “reminded” them that the holy places had been guarded faithfully “for hundreds of years” by Jordan . . .

With this kind of nonsense made plausible by the absence of any comparable Israeli campaign to disseminate the truth, it is not surprising that statesmen, who do not know everything about everything, swallow the fare they are offered.

In the U.S. even transparently preposterous information is sometimes supplied to unsuspecting legislators and statesmen by State Department officials labouring to promote their departmental doctrines. At the height of their pursuit of Saudi Arabian favour, State Department spokesmen unblushingly entertained Senate committees with descriptions of Saudi society which could almost qualify the obscurantist desert kingdom as a second Texas. When the Saudis rejected the request to establish an American base or other facilities on their soil, then secretary of state Alexander Haig defended their decision because they had “suffered so much from colonial rule in the past.” – Balderdash: the Saudis at no time suffered from any colonial rule.

PREJUDICE, whatever its source, and often ignorance, have been behind official American attitudes to Zionism, and then to Israel, ever since World War I. They continue to constitute an important thread in the fabric of American policy. It is surely appropriate that they should be examined afresh particularly this year, when the Allied victory in World War II, and the destruction of European Jewry are to be recalled.

U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz is due to visit Israel next month, formally to participate in the commemorative ceremonies. In recalling the German infamy, can we – should we – fail to remember that many of the victims of the Germans went to their deaths because the British and the Americans deliberately withheld succour from them? There was agreement between them in effect: the Americans helped Britain keep Jews from getting to the Jewish national home, and the British helped keep Jews from trying to reach the U.S. Even the existing U.S. immigration quotas were not filled. Some 200,000 Jews from Europe could have been admitted under those quotas. Twenty-one thousand were admitted.

The U.S., like Britain, refused to bomb Auschwitz and the rail lines leading there, and mendaciously pretended the operation was not practicable.

Three bare years after the Holocaust, the infant Jewish State, threatened with destruction and genocide, was left to its fate by the U.S. A hostile Britain supplied the Arabs lavishly with arms – and the U.S. declared an embargo on arms “to both sides.”

Has Mr. Shultz ever examined the files in his State Department to trace the history of that indifference to the Jewish fate and of hostility to the rebirth of Jewish national existence (attributed by president Truman in 1948 in part to anti-Semitism)?

THE Shultz visit to Israel is designed also to try to further the “peace process.” Does he realize that that process, as perceived in State Department doctrine – is nothing more than a projected shrinkage of Israel according to Arab specifications.

Has Mr. Shultz, then, made a study of even a part of the voluminous literature of Arab-Moslem gut-rejection of Jewish independence? Can he claim ignorance of the public promise of Israel’s annihilation that accompanied the Arab onslaughts on Israel in 1948 and 1967? Can he possibly not have read the PLO’s “Palestinian Covenant” – with the same intent – endorsed by all the Arab states?

Is it merely ignorance that makes possible the American assertion that the current “Mubarak initiative” for recognition of the PLO, and indeed the gobbledegook agreement between Hussein and the defeated, near-desperate Arafat, represent a step toward peace? Is he aware of the myriad indicators that if that “initiative” and that agreement were acted upon, Israel would have to fight the Six-Day War all over again?

That is the second phase of the Arab design. Has Secretary Shultz considered the implications – moral, political and strategic – of U.S. support for the present first phase, support implicit in the Reagan Plan? Has he considered them, moreover, in the context of previous American behaviour – in 1948, in 1942?

It is not, however, Israel’s concerns alone that justify these questions of an American secretary of state. At this historic moment for reflection, he should also recall how, through ignorance and prejudice and false assumptions, the history of U.S. policy in the Middle East has been studded with blunders, tragic for the U.S. and for us.

This is a time for rethinking; and the example in integrity set by Eugene Rostow is waiting to be followed.