Times Bomb

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Articles & Testimony

Imagine the New York Times covering the sinking of the Titanic with only a passing reference to the iceberg. Absurd? Not really. On July 26 the nation's newspaper of record devoted 5,681 words to a retrospective by Jerusalem bureau chief Deborah Sontag titled "Quest for Mideast Peace: How and Why It Failed" and mentioned the word "intifada" just once. While virtually ignoring the Palestinian uprising that has brought the Middle East to the brink of war, the story pushes two arguments. First, that the peace process included "missteps and successes by Israelis, Palestinians and Americans alike." Second, that, in the months following Camp David, the parties were much closer to a final deal than was previously thought. But a close look at Sontag's story reveals lazy reporting, errors of omission, questionable shading, and an indifference to the basic fact that the Palestinian decision to wed diplomacy with violence, not American and Israeli miscues, damned the search for peace.

Sontag's is not the only revisionist look at Mideast diplomacy to hit the newsstands in recent weeks. Writing in the current issue of The New York Review of Books, former National Security Council staffer Rob Malley also ascribes much of the blame for Oslo's failure to Bill Clinton and Ehud Barak rather than to Yasir Arafat. But Malley's article is co-authored with a consultant to Palestinian negotiators, which makes its credibility inherently suspect. And it doesn't carry the imprimatur of the Times.

Unfortunately, Sontag's story doesn't deserve to either. At the article's outset, she explains that her investigation is based on interviews with "key" negotiators and diplomats. But only eight of the three dozen Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans who participated at Camp David are quoted from her own interviews. She cites her own conversation with just one American, then-Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, while relying on recycled comments from others. Absent from her tale are interviews she herself conducted with such central Clinton administration players as the president, the secretary of state, the national security adviser, and the special Middle East coordinator, to name just four.

But if Sontag is lazy with her American sources, she's downright ideological with the Israelis. Two of the three Israelis Sontag quotes are former Labor Ministers Shlomo Ben Ami and Yossi Beilin, men so disgruntled that they have criticized their party's participation in the current national unity government. Even so, Ben Ami has said he considers Arafat to blame for the collapse of the talks. In fact, Ben Ami is now on a media crusade to get the international community to impose a final peace agreement on Israel and the Palestinians because making peace

directly with Arafat, he contends, is impossible. Sontag neglects to mention any of that. She approvingly quotes her third Israeli source--Barak's chief of staff, Gilead Sher--as saying that peace is "doable, feasible and reasonable." But she doesn't say that Sher gave a public speech in Washington, D.C., on April 16, 2001, stating that by the end of September 2000 it had become clear that Arafat would only accept an agreement "in which all his demands were met." And Sontag doesn't cite any of Israel's Camp David veterans who are scathingly critical of Arafat--for instance, the widely respected centrist Dan Meridor, Barak's Security Adviser Danny Yatom, and Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein.

Perhaps most remarkable is Sontag's assertion that Barak was "unwilling to talk." To her, perhaps; to the world, he has spoken at length. In fact, a full week before the publication of Sontag's article, Barak delivered a 45-minute speech in Washington that was repeatedly broadcast on C-SPAN, offering his detailed views on the events of the past year. The full text of that speech was posted on the Internet on July 23, two days before Sontag's article went to press. In Barak's version, Arafat is the culprit par excellence. But Sontag doesn't grapple with the former prime minister's comments at all.

With the Palestinians, Sontag's reporting follows a similar pattern. Aside from Arafat, whose sole quote is a diatribe against Israel's intransigence, she cites three negotiators--Abu Ala, Saeb Erekat, and Nabil Shaath--who (along with Hanan Ashrawi) are the most widely quoted Palestinians in the English-speaking world. Sontag transmits these men's soothing, how-close-we-came assertions while ignoring their less conciliatory statements. She fails to note, for instance, that Shaath appeared on Arab satellite television in the early days of the intifada to endorse the Algeria/Vietnam models of talking and shooting at the same time; that Abu Ala admitted to American journalist David Brooks in his July 2-July 9, 2001, Weekly Standard article, "The Death of Compromise," that "t is impossible from now to 1,000 years that the Palestinians will decrease their size from the 1967 borders"; and that he and Erekat are both on record saying that the parties were far apart on the issues of Jerusalem and refugees, even by the end of the last-ditch Taba negotiations in January 2001, six months after Camp David. And Sontag completely ignores other Arafat intimates, like Cabinet ministers Imad Faluji and Ziad Abu Zayyad, who have both reportedly said that the intifada was part of the Palestinians' strategic plan, as well as the late Faisal Husseini, the PLO's "minister" for Jerusalem, who this year publicly praised the historic objective of building Palestine "from the river to the sea" (i.e., eradicating Israel).

For a journalist who takes aim at what she calls the "potent, simplistic narrative" of Barak's generosity and Arafat's culpability, Sontag's own story is remarkably free of complexity. This refusal to grapple with uncomfortable issues is most pronounced in Sontag's avoidance of the intifada. To her, the failure of the peace process was due to bad chemistry (Barak chatting up Chelsea Clinton instead of Arafat at Camp David) and bad timing (Bill Clinton waiting too long to offer his own peace plan). In her telling, the Palestinian uprising is just part of the background landscape.

But it is not just part of the background landscape. The uprising so transformed the Israeli-Palestinian political context that by the time the two sides were, in Sontag's telling, agonizingly close, it no longer mattered. By January's Taba talks, Barak had the support of just one-third of his people and an even smaller fraction of his parliament. Arafat, for his part, had forged an alliance between his Fatah movement and the radical Hamas opposition. But to discuss the intifada, its roots, and its impact would complicate Sontag's tale of imminent peace gone awry, so she sets it aside. The result is that lynchings, stonings, mortar shelling, and drive-by shootings are acts of violence that, like traffic accidents, just happen. The "cycle of violence started," "an intense spasm of violence erupted," "two Israelis were killed," she writes. By repeatedly employing the passive voice, she avoids assigning responsibility. And if no one is to blame, then focusing on the violence and its causes can only divert attention from the real issue: what happened in the smoke-filled negotiating rooms.

Hence, Sontag makes not a single reference to how violence--any violence--on the part of the Palestinians violated

the founding accord of the Israel-PLO relationship, an exchange of letters between Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin four days before the signing of the Oslo understandings in September 1993. (Israel's recognition of the PLO was premised on the organization's written commitment to forswear terrorism and violence and to pursue diplomacy as the only means to achieve its objectives.) Sontag makes no reference to Arafat's nine-month-long rejection of American pleas for a cease-fire or his flouting of understandings reached with Clinton at Sharm al-Sheikh on October 16 and 17, 2000, and with Shimon Peres in Gaza on November 1. She ignores Arafat's speech in Davos on January 28, 2001, when, the day after the Taba talks had ended and with Peres at his side, he lambasted Israel for using "fascist military aggression." Nor does Sontag mention the sacking of Joseph's Tomb, the terrorist exploits of Tanzim leader Marwan Bargouti, or the repeated denials by Palestinian officials, from Arafat on down, of any Jewish connection to the Temple Mount. Any of that would have marred her portrayal of Arafat as a cooperative partner in peace.

Sontag's discussion of Israeli and Palestinian popular opinion, which radically constricted what negotiators could offer, is also thin and misleading. Time and again, Sontag uses terms like "many," "most," "some," and "few" to marginalize Oslo's critics and enhance the credibility of the doves. (There is, of course, no "left wing" in her story--only "peace advocates" on one side and "right-wing" politicians on the other.) She includes no statistics from the dozens of opinion polls of Israelis and Palestinians during the six months from Camp David to Taba, polls that revealed the deepening chasm between the two sides. Had she done so, she would have had to acknowledge that by Taba, which to her represents the brink of peace, 73 percent of Palestinians supported "military resistance" against Israel, and 62 percent of Israelis rejected Clinton's outline for a peace proposal. By that point, public attitudes had hardened so much that the last-ditch negotiations were, in fact, a surreal exercise disconnected from political reality.

As with all revisionism, there is a kernel of truth in Sontag's account: Diplomacy did not end with Camp David, and Israel did make ever-more-generous offers. Israelis and Americans did make mistakes, from which there is much to learn. But to lump together U.S. and Israeli diplomatic errors with Arafat's refusal to negotiate fully and peacefully with an Israeli government keen to end the conflict is to turn the peaks and valleys of history into a monotonous prairie of moral equivalence. Sontag not only misses the big story--the intifada--but she gets wrong even the peripheral story she focuses on: that the parties were close to the brass ring at Taba. They weren't, and supporters of a lasting peace should be thankful that the parties were still far apart and that no deal emerged. At that hyperpolarized moment, Israeli voters almost certainly would have rejected such a deal, setting back peacemaking even further.

Eventually, once the current horror subsides, Palestinians and Israelis--with America's help--will probably resume discussing the basic issues that divide them. In the meantime, the final weeks of diplomacy prior to Ariel Sharon's victory over Barak, in which Sontag sees such hope, deserve examination only as a case study in diplomatic irrelevance--the kind of exercise we can only hope future Israeli, American, and Palestinian negotiators learn to avoid. ❖

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