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Arabs shouldn't weep for Helen Thomas

By Michael Young

Commentary by

By this time, you will have heard what happened to former White House correspondent Helen Thomas, who resigned this week as a columnist for Hearst newspapers after a comment she made to an American rabbi, David Nesenoff, was caught on videotape.

On May 27, Thomas attended Jewish Heritage Celebration Day at the White House. There, Nesenoff asked her if she had anything to say about Israel. "Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine," Thomas replied. "Remember, these people are occupied, and it's their land; it's not German, it's not Poland's." When asked where the Jews should go, she answered "they should go home" to "Poland, Germany, America and everywhere else." Nesenoff posted her remarks online and all went dark for the 89-year-old journalist of Lebanese origin.

It's never pleasant to see someone self-destruct, particularly someone as prominent as Helen Thomas, the dean of White House reporters who had been asking difficult questions of American presidents for almost half a century. However, it would be an insult to Thomas to dismiss the whole affair as the foolish ramblings of a senile woman. If she continued to write for Hearst, then presumably she was of sound enough mind to be taken seriously by the likes of Nesenoff.

Nor would it be quite fair to suggest that Thomas was being anti-Semitic. If anything, her impossible vision offered up an extreme form of integration – or rather reintegration. Let the Jews come back to their countries of origin, including the United States, was her proposal. For anti-Semites, at least those living in the West, it's usually a contrary trajectory they seek to impose: the departure of Jews to wherever they are accepted, above all Israel.

The fact is that Thomas' statements were, simply, stupid, as well as ahistorical and thoroughly out of touch with the mainstream in the Palestinian national movement. Two decades ago the Palestinian Liberation Organization accepted the idea of a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem. Before that, even the uncompromising Palestinian National Charter of 1968 accepted that Jews who had resided in Palestine "until the beginning of the Zionist invasion" would be considered Palestinians. The date of that invasion was left unspecified, but as French analyst Xavier Baron has written, the Palestinian National Council established it as 1917, which meant that at least some Jews would be allowed to remain in Palestine.

More important, even in their most obdurate mood Palestinian nationalists recognized that there were Jews in Palestine long before the creation of Israel, something Thomas failed to admit. For her the Jews are entirely alien to the land, and she could not possibly have been limiting her suggestion to the occupied Palestinian territories, since she never indicated that Jews should return to Israel proper.

Thomas was speaking from her gut, and no doubt quite a few Arabs and individuals sympathetic to the Palestinian cause applauded from their gut too. The daily Al-Hayat even published an article this week on Thomas' resignation, under a headline stating that she was pushed out of her job because of criticism from the "Jewish lobby." That was nonsense. The condemnation was universal, and rightly so. Thomas' words were indefensible, as was her inability to grasp what it means to tell Jews that they should return to Germany and Poland, countries where Jewish communities were annihilated during the World War II.

The worst thing that could happen is for Thomas' fate to feed into a new Arab tale of victimhood. Siding with crackpot conclusions like hers only discredits Arabs, especially at a time when the onus is on Israel to explain precisely what it intends to do with the Palestinians it has dispossessed, occupied, and mistreated for several generations, and who within a not-too-distant future will form a demographic majority between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

Israel has provided no convincing answers and, as a consequence, has seen the narrative of Jewish victimization diluted by growing international sympathy for the Palestinian narrative of victimization. One narrative must not be allowed to displace the other, but for Arabs to endorse Thomas means they seek exclusivity for their own.

A Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement is probably a long way away, perhaps generations away at this stage. However, the Arabs have as little right to be ambiguous about what should become of the Jews of Israel after that settlement as Israeli Jews have the right to evade questions about their plans for the Palestinians. This is not a marginal matter. There is a real risk that the Palestinian national movement may eventually fall under the sway of Hamas, whose charter is disturbingly silent about what should happen to Jews in a liberated Palestine. Presumably, a majority would be expelled or choose to leave, while those staying behind would find themselves part of a "protected" second-class community under an Islamic government.

When Thomas was publicly challenging George W. Bush about his war in Iraq, much of the American literati applauded. The crusty old cow has spunk, they muttered admiringly. Now she's a pariah, and faint echoes of admiration are accompanied by embarrassed coughs and the clearing of throats. And yet for me, the real worth of Thomas was her complete blindness as to the genocidal nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, her abridgment of the Iraqi issue so that it mainly encompassed her dislike of Bush and her verbal jousting with the president – a parochial endeavor implying that Iraq was only really important as part of a Washington conversation.

Helen Thomas was a good reporter, and for that she merits kudos. But reporters don't necessarily always think things through, and many of them are no better than stenographers with an attitude. That someone of Thomas' experience should have been so easily betrayed by impulse suggests that lately she had veered into the latter category. It's a shame, but there you have it. We really don't need to disgrace ourselves by trying to discern reason in her unreason.

Michael Young is opinion editor of **THE DAILY STAR**. His "The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle" (Simon & Schuster) has just been published.

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