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Bush Countenances Middle East Violence

by Sheldon Richman

The administration of George W. Bush has done some contemptible things in its five and a half years, but what it's doing now in the Middle East could be a new low. Innocent civilians are dying in Lebanon and Israel, but the administration's position is that the time is not right for a ceasefire. By no coincidence, this is also Israel's position.

At a joint appearance this week with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was asked whether the U.S. should tell Israel to stop the brutal bombing of Lebanon; she replied, "We all want a cessation of violence. We all want the protection of civilians. We have to make certain that anything that we do is going to be of lasting value.... We have to deal with underlying conditions so that we can create sustainable conditions for political progress there."

This obviously did not sit well with Gheit, who hastened to speak even as Rice began to leave the podium: "A ceasefire *is* imperative.... We have to bring it [the fighting] to an end as soon as possible."

But Rice wouldn't let Gheit have the last word, at least not *that* word: "We all agree that it should happen as soon as possible — when conditions are conducive to do so."

What conditions must be achieved before the killing stops?

Here is what Rice, and President Bush, are saying: we will support a ceasefire when Israel is ready for one. This stance is detestable. It should shame all Americans.

If you want to understand the evil here, imagine assembled in a large room all the hundreds or thousands of Lebanese and Israelis who will die or be injured in the next several weeks that Israel says it needs to achieve its goals. Now imagine President Bush addressing them:

"Ladies and gentlemen, you and your children will be killed or maimed in the coming weeks. I'm sorry about that, but the conditions are not conducive to a ceasefire. I'm sure you all understand."

During her press appearance Rice explained that the Middle East has been racked by violence for years and thus needs conditions that will make a sustainable peace possible.

With that in mind, Mr. Bush might tell the assembled future war casualties, “Yes, the hostilities could stop immediately, and you would be spared — but only until war broke out again, maybe months or years from now. So I’m sure you can see why we don’t support a ceasefire until it can be permanent.”

How many of the assembled would think, “He’s right. What’s the point of my children and me living a few more months or years if we might be killed anyway should things flare up again? I agree. We might as well die now.”?

To ask the question is to answer it. All the soon-to-be-dead-or-mutilated would be desperate to take their chances with an immediate ceasefire. How dare these politicians play God with their lives?

One is at a loss for words to express how outrageous the administration’s position is. The least any decent, civilized person can do under the current circumstances is demand an immediate end to the killing on both sides. To say, as Bush and his minions say, that the killing may go on until one of the parties has accomplished its goals is to countenance murder and mayhem. This is nothing less than moral depravity. And it is not mitigated by Bush’s meaningless request that Israel “limit” civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure.

What will it take to make the American people see that “their” government behaves like a criminal gang?

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