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## **Mr. Bush, Are You There?**

**by Sheldon Richman**

If President Bush is trying to convince us that he hasn't the slightest understanding of the Middle East, then he's doing an outstanding job. Every statement he makes — and this goes for his secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, too — is soaked in ignorance. Any American who is paying attention should be shuddering to think that this man is running U.S. foreign policy.

Let's ignore Rice's statement that the destruction of Lebanon represents the "birth pangs of a new Middle East." To equate Israel's reckless disregard for Arab life, as in Qana, with a mother's giving birth is obscene.

President Bush, in his usual arrogant way, shows that he knows nothing of what he speaks. He still opposes an immediate ceasefire, explaining on Fox News, "See, stopping for the sake of stopping [!], you know, is — is — is — can be OK, except it won't address the root cause of the problem." Which is? "And the root cause of the problem is armed militias firing rockets from a sovereign nation into another sovereign nation."

Is he aware that before 1982 Hezbollah did not exist? Does he have a clue what brought it into existence? He might be inclined to think that it arose to grab Israeli soldiers across the border. But in fact it arose after Israel invaded Lebanon — despite a year of quiet on that border — in order to wipe out Palestinian refugees displaced by Israel's earlier program to "redeem" Arab-owed land. Israel remained in southern Lebanon for 18 years. It even set up its own Christian Lebanese militia to do some of the dirty work. Israeli forces killed tens of thousands of Lebanese during the siege of Beirut and the occupation. The Israeli-sponsored militia slaughtered hundreds of Palestinians in refugee camps like cattle. Israel had its way with Lebanon, and no one could do anything about it.

Hezbollah organized to resist that illegal occupation. This is legitimate under international law, not to mention moral law. Not every Hezbollah action has been defensible, but most people would say the same about Israel. We should not lose sight of the context or the fact that the U.S. government assisted Israel in virtually every respect, especially by the provision of money and weapons.

President Bush says Hezbollah must be disarmed. Why? So Israel can continue to treat southern Lebanon like a door mat? Much is made of Israel's departure from Lebanon in 2000, as though this were some magnanimous gesture. It was driven out by Hezbollah, which not only defended the Lebanese, but provided a variety of services to the suffering Shi'ites — schools, medical clinics, homes, and more. When Lebanon had elections, Hezbollah members were elected to Parliament. Israel withdrew, but it has not respected the border. As documented by the UN, its warplanes violated Lebanese airspace daily. Here's what Israeli analyst Ran HaCohen writes: "Since Israel withdrew from Lebanon six years ago, then, it hasn't given its northern neighbor even a single day of quiet.... And just as Israelis wonder about the purpose of Hezbollah's missile arsenal, so could Lebanon, and so should we all, wonder what was the purpose of the thousands of Israeli overflights and sonic booms in Lebanon's sky: was it to gather some information not available to Israel's satellites anyway, or, much more likely, just to terrorize Lebanon's population by showing them that we violate their sovereignty 'whenever we deem it necessary'?"

In this light Hezbollah's seizing of Israeli soldiers looks less like unprovoked aggression, doesn't it? It didn't fire rockets at Israel until the IDF started pounding the very core of Lebanese society.

But Hezbollah gets arms from Iran, President Bush protests. Can he really say this with a straight face? Does Israel not get arms — the most sophisticated known — from a foreign power? Who speeded up shipment of precision bombs to facilitate the current demolition of Lebanese civil society? Hello? Mr. Bush, are you there?

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