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There's No Substitute for Complete Victory in the Middle East

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When he is not fulminating over the latest Palestinian terrorist attack against Israeli citizens, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon must find more than a little irony in the dilemma now facing the United States in Afghanistan.

With Taliban and al-Qaeda forces on the run, Washington confronts a difficult question: What should be done with the leaders of these two defeated terrorist organizations and the thousands of fighters under their command?

In a recent statement, Hamid Karzi, the new Afghan Prime Minister, suggested that Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban spiritual leader, could be spared the full weight of allied justice if he were only to renounce terrorism. This, he implied, would help ease the process of reconciliation and pave the way for Omar's followers to reintegrate, eventually, into Afghan society.

At a Dec. 6, news conference, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld bristled at this idea, declaring that the United States was unalterably opposed to any plan that would permit either the Taliban or al-Qaeda leadership to go free to live in dignity among the Afghan people. They must be punished and stopped from doing what they're doing, he said.

Rumsfeld's words were echoed by presidential spokesman, Ari Fleisher, who told reporters that the president believes very strongly that those who harbor terrorists need to be brought to justice. Bush, he stated, is convinced that Omar and his henchmen harbor terrorists. There was no hint of compromise.

History, though, is full of contradictions. It was 1982 when Israel launched operation Peace for Galilee, an ill-fated military strike intended to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization from southern Lebanon. Hundreds of Israeli citizens had been killed and injured as a result of cross-border PLO terrorist attacks. Sharon was then Israel's Defense Minister and a principal architect of the war.

After four months of fighting, the Israeli Army was on the outskirts of Beirut and poised for a final assault on the city. Inside sat the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, and 14,400 Palestinian and Syrian fighters preparing to make their last stand.

At that moment, the United States stepped in and demanded that Israel halt its operations. In sharply worded communiques, Washington warned the Israelis that they would not be permitted to humiliate Arafat, let alone destroy his army. Both were to be spared the indignity of outright defeat.

Wishing to avoid an open break with Washington, Israel had little choice but to comply. It was a fateful decision, one grounded in the false hope that Middle East peace and stability could be bought with mercy.

On Aug. 21, 1982, the first PLO fighters were evacuated from Beirut. Palestinians celebrated the PLO's victory with dancing and gunfire in the streets. One group of terrorists was transported out of the city under U.S. naval escort, another overland to Syria. Some 12 countries agreed to take the fighters.

In the end, it was Israel, not the PLO, that was humiliated. Arafat cheated the hangman's noose and in one stroke exposed the Achilles' heel of both Israel and the West. He learned that as long as great powers eschew violence in favor of a peaceful end to conflict, those who depend on chaos for survival will always have the upper hand.

What should have been a PLO rout became a strategic retreat. Israel's strength melted into vulnerability.

As Sharon feared, Arafat's fighters returned with a vengeance, only this time to the West Bank and Gaza, where today they are principally responsible for the latest Palestinian uprising that has left hundreds dead and injured over the last 14 months. Sitting in his Ramallah bunker, Arafat may yet be hoping for another miracle. Only time will tell whether he has exhausted his nine lives.

It was a similar story in 1973. The end of the Yom Kippur War found Egypt's Army surrounded and helpless in the Sinai desert. They were only saved from annihilation when Washington ordered Israel to suspend its attack. Sharon, then a military commander, watched in frustration as Egyptian honor was spared at Israel's expense.

Now, in Afghanistan, the shoe is on the other foot. The United States finds itself struggling with how best to transform a battlefield victory into a lasting triumph. With memories of Sept. 11 still fresh in the minds of Americans, the impulse for retribution is strong, and rightly so.

As America sleeps, U.S. and allied forces continue to search the caves and tunnels of eastern Afghanistan, hoping to kill or capture Osama bin Laden and what remains of his local al-Qaeda organization. Not surprisingly, there is not a scintilla of interest in safeguarding bin Laden's dignity or preventing another Arab humiliation.

Prime Minister Sharon must be perplexed at the double standard. Nineteen years ago, President Ronald Reagan demanded that Israel halt its bombing of PLO tunnels and fortifications in Beirut. He called the action unfathomable and senseless. More recently, the State Department has condemned Israel for reprisal raids against known Palestinian terrorists, labeling the strikes provocative, unproductive and disproportionate.

But Afghanistan is America's war, and different rules apply.

Washington is now discovering what others in the Middle East have known for a long time. In a region where respect matters more than mercy, there is no substitute for the coup-de-grace.

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