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Fighting Alligators vs. Draining the Swamp

By Daniel Rose

The American philanthropic enterprise began as “charity,” aid to the destitute, the handicapped, the orphan. It evolved into “philanthropy,” support for a broad array of non-profit institutions and services and into research into “root causes” of varied social problems.

Today, and in the years ahead, the challenges of a complex world require more complex and sophisticated responses—locally, nationally and internationally.

Among the unsolved problems I present for your consideration is a new one, one that must be addressed by America’s “third sector,” the conscience of our society.

We are engaged in a war of ideas, in a battle for world opinion—not in a clash of civilizations, not in a conflict of medieval theologies, not in a war of economic imperialism, but in a contest between totalitarianism and the liberal democratic values of free thought and expression, secularism, tolerance and critical inquiry.

It is a war we are in danger of losing. Unlike battles of military hardware, in which America is pre-eminent, the battle for hearts and minds requires a degree of wisdom, conviction and sophistication

beyond that our national leaders seem able to muster. “Realist” weapon systems are important, but “idealist” philosophic underpinning may be more important.

While our government focuses on the short-term goal of combating terrorism, or “fighting alligators,” the philanthropic sector should focus on the long-term goal of “draining the swamp,” or helping dysfunctional, hostile societies evolve into peaceful, economically successful and cooperative members of the world community—for their benefit and for ours.

At the moment, prospects seem dim; but the dramatic turnaround of China after Mao, of Eastern Europe and/or Russia after the end of the Cold War, of the so-called Asian Tigers in recent decades, have involved cultural change of similar magnitude. Today, with the Middle East in flux, advances in electronic communication—in news media, computers and the Internet—mean that governments no longer have a monopoly on communication.

At a moment in history when fanaticism and destructive technology are converging, as 9/11 demonstrated so tragically, thoughtful people should approach the challenge of international and cross-cultural dialogue with a sense of urgency.

Feelings of national grievance and resentment against us throughout the world, justified or not, have an explosive potential that must be faced, analyzed, and, where possible, defused. Societies that feel defensive, humiliated and beleaguered must be reassured.

An American public, encouraged by its geography, history and favorable economic situation to regard the rest of the world primarily as customers or suppliers, must learn that our future, our physical well-being, and

even the existence of our major cities, are not so assured as we once believed, and that political ferment elsewhere is our problem, too.

The world's poor and disenfranchised—not only in the Middle East, but in Latin America, Africa and Asia—question what place the modern world holds for them. They wonder if economic well being, dignity, a sense of identity, personal freedom and a better future for their children are possible for them. We must reassure them that liberal democracy is the best way to achieve their goals.

In the Arab world where 280 million people are mired in a web of social, economic and political problems complicated by, but not caused by, theological questions, America has important self-interest in helping this significant faction of mankind emerge from chaos and enter the 21st century.

The 1.2 billion people of the Muslim world include those in Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia; these are countries which are politically mature and advancing economically and at the moment seem to pose little threat to the world, although the al-Qaeda network in those countries is active and expanding, and we can count the growing number of its victims.

The Arab world is a different story, and it is an immediate and present danger to others.

Significant change there can come only from within; the role of “outside” entities should be limited to support and encouragement; change must take place gradually, in ways that are sensitive to culture and tradition. The role of the West in general and of America in particular can be positive in what we do and in what we don't do. Helping to bring the Arab world peacefully into the world community should be on the agenda of American educational institutions,

foundations and philanthropic donors.

The nature of the problem is presented clearly in two important United Nations-sponsored documents: the Arab Human Development Reports of 2002 and 2003. These reports, hailed by *Time Magazine* as “the most important publications of the year,” were prepared by a panel of distinguished Arab experts. They spell out in detail why the Arab world has fallen so far behind the rest of the world, and why its alienated, frustrated and enraged young people, unvoiced and powerless, are lashing out destructively and present such a menace to the rest of the world.

The prime cause, according to these reports, is what they call the “freedom deficit”; the region is the world’s least free, and has the lowest level of public participation in government.

The second cause is the dismal state of education and diffusion of knowledge in the Arab world.

The third is the exclusion of women from meaningful participation in Arab society.

And the fourth is the isolation of the Arab world from the international trading community.

The ramifications are heartbreaking, and are reflected throughout the Reports by citations showing, for example, that while Muslims constitute some 20% of the world’s population, they produce fewer than 1% of the world’s scientists, or publish in Arabic few non-religious books each year. Only 1.6% of the Arab population has Internet access, compared with 68% in the U.K. and 79% in the U.S.

These underlying factors create an atmosphere in which fervent religious fundamentalism, paranoid conspiratorial theories and a desire for violence are manifest. The best discussion of this is still Eric Hoffer's classic, *The True Believer*.

Addressing these problems in the Muslim world in general and in the Arab world in particular is a pressing concern for all.

We must help America and the West to a fuller and sounder knowledge of all aspects of the Muslim world, not praising or condemning, but understanding. Ambrose Bierce's century-old comment that, "War is God's way of teaching Americans geography" is timely.

We should help American Muslims demonstrate to the world how one can live a valid Islamic life without conflict with a larger democratic society.

Since the Arab-American Muslim community is influenced by Saudi Arabian money, and extremist elements are visible and vocal, those Muslims who reject extremism and desire peaceful integration with American society need support from the wider community.

Edward Gibbon pointed out that in ancient Rome, the public thought all religions were equally true, the philosophers found them equally false, and the administrators found them equally useful. Perhaps all three groups were right.

To increase Arab exposure to the best the West has to offer we must strengthen and improve institutions like the American-sponsored universities in Beirut and Cairo. We must help to create or expand institutions like the United World Colleges, headed by Queen Noor and Nelson Mandela. We should make imaginative use of emerging

information technologies to help the Muslim world feel it can modernize without becoming westernized. And we should encourage and support those who embrace non-violent accommodation with modernity. These people must be found—in the present oppressive climate they are unlikely to come forward.

American philanthropy can play a constructive role in strengthening those institutions, groups and individuals working to reconstruct the Muslim world. It can help them reconnect with the positive aspects of a distant past such as the Golden Age of the Abbassid caliphate, when Muslim scientists, philosophers, artists and educators sparkled in one of the great cultural flowerings of all time. For five glowing centuries, until it was destroyed by the Mongol hordes of Genghis Kahn, a society stemming from the teachings of the Prophet of Mecca and Medina rivaled the greatest civilizations of mankind.

Then, Muslims remembered that the Prophet said, “The ink of scientists is equal to the blood of martyrs”; then, Muslim thinkers were proud of their familiarity with the best of the world’s cultures; then, it was taken for granted that science and knowledge belonged to all mankind and that intellectuals’ borrowing and lending benefited everyone. What the Muslim world had once, it can have again.

Today, the suicide bomber is mistakenly viewed by the world as the quintessential Muslim. But we forget how recent a development violence has been in the Arab world. When people note that nearly a million Jews left or were expelled from Arab countries after the creation of Israel in 1948, they forget that those Jews lived peacefully in those Arab countries for centuries. Before WWII, one-third of Baghdad’s population was Jewish.

The current espousal of violence and killing of innocents by militant

Islamist fundamentalists may end in time, as it will with the Chechnyans in Russia, the Tamil in Sri Lanka, the Basques in Spain and the IRA in Ireland; but the greatest disservice Muslim totalitarians have performed for the Islamic world has been to disdain genuine education and to substitute religious indoctrination and rote memorization of a few Koranic texts.

Financed by Saudi oil revenues in the belief that backing the Wahhabi mullahs will ward off political upheaval, or by Libyan money, the madrassas-local hatred. No math, no science, no foreign languages or literature are included in curricula heavy with diatribes against everything foreign.

Edward Said, a sympathetic Arab intellectual, wrote, “We need a qualitatively different knowledge based on understanding rather than on authority, uncritical repetition and mechanical reproduction.”

But if Saudi or Libyan funds can be influential, so can American charitable funds—to different ends.

To the extent that true education—education that stimulates curiosity and critical thinking as well as imparting knowledge—can be brought to the Muslim masses, a positive impact is possible.

Primary and secondary education are local concerns, but proper training of teachers and the provision of appropriate secular educational materials can be provided on a larger scale.

Today, we forget what the Jesuits have always understood: the importance of inculcation of values in early childhood.

That some al-Qaeda bombers have American college degrees is not a

reflection of faulty university training, but of poor moral training as children; and that must be remedied.

The costs will be great, but the rewards would be immense.

Helping the Muslim world to rediscover a “usable past”—a creative constructive past—and helping it turn its back on simplistic fanatics are tasks to engage the best thinking and resources of the American philanthropic sector.

Throughout the Muslim world there are thoughtful individuals who wish to modernize but not westernize Islam; they deserve support in their struggle against those who would return Islam to the Bedouin culture of the seventh century, but this time with weapons of mass destruction.

Throughout the world, battles rage over how to protect a society’s traditional culture from the homogenization that globalization brings. Mass production of clothing and mass communication of styles have caused teenagers everywhere to dress alike, but their parents resent it when they think alike. We should make clear that modernization does not necessarily mean Westoxification.

American popular culture attracts the foreign young, but repels the old who see it as violent, materialistic and sex-drenched, promoting a value system they deplore. The older generation also fears that modernization mandates a humiliating loss of national identity.

Maintaining national dignity and personal self-respect while modernizing is important in successful adaptation; Americans do not realize how diminishing it is when English displaces local languages, the Beatles displace national folk songs, and teenagers regard their elders as unaware.

A creative tension between modernism and traditionalism—along the lines of Japan’s Meiji Restoration in 1868 but without the militarism—can produce an evolving culture that will reflect the best of the old and the best of the new.

Some aspects of modernization—equal participation of women in all aspects of society, and civil rights in its fullest form, i.e. free speech, political rights, free press, etc.—need to be presented not as yielding to “western” influences, but as joining the world’s advanced societies.

These are not theological questions but political ones, and they deserve 21st century answers.

The best argument liberals can present is to show that social justice, social peace, material well-being and children leading fulfilling lives are more likely to be achieved in a modern, tolerant, well-educated society where free choice permits each to select the life he or she wishes to lead.

Helping Arab women educate and liberate themselves is an important way the West can bring light and air to the Arab world. Awarding a Nobel Prize to Shirin Ebadi, a leading Iranian civil rights activist, and giving the prestigious Civil Courage prize to Shahnaz Bukhari, a Pakistani woman, for her work on behalf of victimized women, send important signals; and they do have an impact.

This month, for example, Morocco substantially liberalized its divorce laws, and even Saudi Arabia, which does not permit its women to drive a car, has recently appointed a woman as Dean of a Saudi university. The winds of change are blowing.

To the extent that many in the Muslim world can envision a future of

legitimate aspirations met and positive expectations realized, there is an increasing change of constructive change.

Many in the West do not realize that there is no single accepted Islamic theology, no one accepted interpretation of Islamic law, no central Islamic authority. There will always be fringe groups who despise us. But just as the majority of the Muslim world today is energized by hate and resentment, so it can, in time, with enormous resources and well-directed effort be galvanized by hope.

We forget how quickly Afghans turned their backs on the Taliban when liberated in 2001; that could be a portent for the future. The current ferment in Iran reflects growing discontent with the mullahs' mismanagement of the economy; reformist sentiment can be revived and Iran may, over time, evolve into a Muslim society with a secular democracy.

In Saudi Arabia, smothered by fundamentalist Wahhabis, the seemingly intractable problems are political, religious and educational; if secular education for the young could be introduced, political and religious change could follow.

With effective political institutions in place (and with a growing entrepreneurial middle class able to participate effectively in a global market economy), Islamist fundamentalists could function in a liberal society as do the Amish in America or as Ultra Orthodox Jews throughout the world.

What should be the role of American philanthropy in a changing world? Your imagination can be your guide, but it is good to recognize that efforts are being made to open these closed societies, to stimulate the free flow of ideas and to create the necessary preconditions for

democratic societies.

The Carnegie Corporation, under the leadership of Vartan Gregorian, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, led by Stephen Heintz, and the MacArthur Foundation, headed by Jonathan Fanton, have begun major efforts to reach out to the American Muslim community and to stimulate dialogue between western thinkers and Muslim intellectuals, academics and professionals in the Middle East.

The EastWest Institute, led by John Mroz, is establishing training centers in turkey where young academics, journalists, and government administrators in the Muslim communities of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia are exposed to current western thinking and managerial techniques.

At the Brookings Institution, the Saban Center's papers and conferences on U.S. relations with the Islamic world are invaluable tools; and the Pew Foundation's sponsorship of public opinion polls and the Mott Foundation's varied efforts are important.

Private donors or smaller foundations seeking a worthwhile American vehicle for intervention might consider the Abraham Fund, which brings together Arabs and Jews in Israel; the Boston-based International Institute for Mediation and Historical Conciliation, which performs imaginative and constructive work in many nations; and the Sabre Foundation, also in Boston, which distributes thousands of books in the Third World, and is expanding its donation in the Arab countries.

These and similar efforts are a drop in the bucket, but let us hope they are harbingers of a flood to come.

Turkey, a successful secular Muslim state under siege by al-Qaeda, may

be the key demonstration project from which others can learn; but “the Turkish model” is not yet a template for replication. The late Tip O’Neill’s observation that “all politics is local,” applies to the Middle East as well.

Helping the new Muslim “Justice and Development Party’s” government in Turkey to demonstrate a liberal balance between secularism, Muslim tradition and democracy; helping it strengthen its parliamentary, legal and educational systems; helping it deal sensitively with questions like Kurdish cultural rights and a well-functioning civil society—will serve as a constructive influence throughout the Arab world and speed the day when the Arab world evolves successfully.

Academic exchange programs and visiting professorships; imaginative use of advanced information technology for educational purposes, such as creating an Arabic version of *Sesame Street*; the opening of libraries and reading rooms, computer centers and even children’s science museums; translation into Arabic and wide dissemination of appropriate western documents and texts including the best western text books in the humanities and the social sciences are needed.

If the 5,000 princes of Arabia’s ruling House of Saud realize that at Runnymede, England’s seminal Magna Carta was given not to the common people but to the nobles, who knows what may follow?

If a young Syrian or Libyan reads Thoreau’s essay on *Civil Disobedience*, who knows if the impact on him will be like that the essay had on the young Mohandas K. Gandhi, who, in turn, influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Who knows if a young Tunisian reading Montesquieu or James Madison on governmental separation of powers may be stirred to thought and

then to action?

If John Stuart Mill's *Essay on Liberty* were studied in every Arab secondary school, our world would be a safer place.

Creation, in the Arab world, of business schools that inculcate the free flow of ideas, capital and people would be an effective vehicle to spread the message.

Today, virtually all Arab companies are individually or family-owned. Venture capital, perpetuation, limited liability, increased liquidity, risk management, greater exposure, transparency and other benefits from corporate structure are absent. The introduction of public ownership of commercial, industrial and financial entities could transform the region.

The cumulative impact of these steps would be formidable.

These "seeding" efforts fall on fertile soil, as reflected in the 350 people arrested recently for participating in Saudi Arabia's first known political demonstrations. Stimulated by a London-based group of Saudis called the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia that reaches a growing Saudi audience by the Internet and by radio broadcasts, this event may foreshadow what is to come.

Well-intentioned calls for "Marshall Plan" economic thinking in the Arab world ignore the fact that such efforts can succeed only if introduced into societies psychologically prepared to benefit from them. In developing the pre-conditions for progress, American philanthropy can play an important role.

Mistakes will be made, and some well-intentioned efforts may prove counter-productive but we must try.

The State Department uses the term “clientitis” to refer to diplomats sent abroad who come to see the world through foreign eyes; that can happen with philanthropic groups, too. Some of the most virulent participants at the recent U.N. Conference in Durban (from which Colin Powell withdrew the U.S. delegation) were heavily financed by U.S. charities.

It is dismaying to see American charitable funds unwittingly underwriting hate speech, disruption and even violence. Responsible donors should know where their funds are going.

However we must try, try, try our best to effect positive change.

We will know we have succeeded when the Arab world boasts of its human capital stemming from education rather than its financial capital stemming from oil revenues, or when a future Prime Minister of Malaysia points with pride to the Muslim Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud or Jonas Salk.

Today, Finland, with a population of 5.5 million, produces more than all the Arab nations combined. Tomorrow could be a different story.

The French statesman George Clemenceau stated an important truth when he declared that, “War is too important to be left to the generals.” By extension, education cannot be left to the educators, health to the doctors, and so forth.

The philosophic defense of our society cannot be left to our government leaders who have failed miserably to speak effectively to our friends, let alone our enemies.

Franklin D. Roosevelt in WWII, Woodrow Wilson in WWI, Abraham

Lincoln in the Civil War, and Thomas Jefferson at our nation's birth had "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind"; each stated the philosophic case for our cause, and acted on it.

Our government has recently started to "talk, talk, talk" about democratic values, but it has yet to "walk, walk, walk" in the Middle East; and it shows no sign of doing so.

Dealing with the immediate short-term threat of terrorist attack is a challenge for governments. Meeting the longer-term challenge may rest on the shoulders of civilians and particularly on the philanthropic world.

We must present to the people of the Arab world alternatives to autocratic rule and militant radicalism, changing hearts and minds and creating the pre-conditions for liberal, democratic, secular societies. Societies based on the rule of law and respect for human rights, on the accountability of government officials, on a vibrant civil society, on government transparency to prevent corruption.

We must convey the vision of a peaceful, cooperative, mutually helpful world in which all can play a productive role.

Let us hope that the American non-profit world will rise successfully to that challenge.

Daniel Rose talks can be found on: www.danielrose.org

