

REVIEWS



Battle Lines: The American Media and the Intifada

Jim Lederman

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■ Jim Lederman's study is not so much about the media and the *intifada*, as about the way in which international protagonists, policy-makers and the fourth estate are caught in a dangerous dance of manipulation and influence. Lederman's exploration of this dynamic "information loop" raises important issues about the power and responsibility of the media in the new information age.

Lederman grounds his analysis in long field experience in the region: a foreign correspondent stationed in Jerusalem since 1966, he has worked for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and National Public Radio. A great strength of this work is that the analysis does not treat the media's reaction to the *intifada* as a piece of isolated history. The author deftly illustrates that the reporting that took place during the *intifada*, and the *intifada* itself, were the result of cumulative incremental changes in relationships and perceptions of the four protagonists he analyzes: Israel, the Palestinians, the American media and American foreign policy makers.

The author's desire to provide historical context to his analysis is laudable, yet in a book of such an ambitious scope, gaps are inevitable. The danger with gaps when writing on the Middle East is that they can be regarded as an indication of bias. Scholars and journalists alike have suffered attacks against their "objectivity" while treading in this political minefield.

Although no political agenda is declared, *Battle Lines* is a political book. Lederman is skilled at dishing out criticism to all of the players he scrutinizes; however, he is much less attuned to the nuances on the Palestinian side of the divide. One gap in understanding is the failure to capture the dynamic nature of the interaction between Palestinians resident in the occupied territories and those living in the diaspora. This linkage is important because it plays a principal role in creating grassroots support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) among Palestinians in the occupied territories. Lederman uncritically subscribes to the argument that there is no indigenous support for the PLO and that the PLO imposes its leadership there through cooptation and intimidation. No doubt this was one tool employed by the PLO to guard against rival leadership from time to time, however, it is only part of the story and belittles the genuine grassroots loyalty to the organization.

This same paradigm is used to negate the role of the PLO in the unfolding of the *intifada*. Lederman is accurate when describing the frustration of the younger generation of Palestinians at the corruption of the "cadillac revolutionaries." But again, this is only part of the story. The widespread Palestinian recognition of the problems in the PLO and the need for reform is more akin to airing dirty laundry than disowning the PLO entirely.

Lederman's impatient dismissal of the *intifada*'s political impact is curious given his obvious concern for history:

The PLO's inability to extricate itself from its old and bankrupt presumptions was the death knell for the *intifada*. The eventual tacit acceptance of Israel's right to exist extracted by the

United States from Yasir Arafat that autumn with such obvious difficulty was too little, too late. By the fall of 1988, one year after it began, the fate of the *intifada* had been decided.

True, the PLO was unable to fully seize the political opportunity presented by the *intifada*, but it can be argued that there has been a fundamental shift in the way in which the international community perceives the Palestinian problem. The current peace process, the leverage that the US is willing to mount against Israel, and the recognition of the centrality of the Palestinian question, is in part a function of the learning curve of an international community (especially North American audiences) highly influenced by the *intifada*.

A final example of insensitive political interpretation is the one-sided use of the word "terrorism." Lederman uses the term often to describe violent Palestinian acts against both civilian and military targets. However, many journalists working in the Middle East concur that the word "terrorism" has been so widely abused in Middle East politicking, it has become virtually meaningless. Robert Fisk, veteran Middle East correspondent, has written: "'Terrorism' no longer means 'terrorism.' It is not a definition; it is a political contrivance. 'Terrorists' are those who use violence against the side that is using the word." If the term is to be used at all, it should be applied evenhandedly, regardless of the nationality of the perpetrators.

This book's true value is that it raises important issues concerning the impact of the media on foreign policy decision making: why are some countries chosen for coverage and others not; is the reporting fair to all parties to a conflict; what is the place of the press in the modern political firmament; how much of a story is shaped by a reporter's personality and views.

In a fascinating expose of what he calls "Washington rules,"

Lederman contends that the American media are driven by the need to make highly complex problems both comprehensible and relevant to "Joe-Six-Pack." Once a simplistic story-line has become entrenched, it can distort the perception of events, preventing both journalists and audiences from acquiring new understanding. It is in the discussion of this "information loop" that *Battle Lines* makes a singular contribution.

As described by Lederman, the loop works this way: a correspondent's report on an event or conflict, together with reaction from US officials if the story is important enough, gets looped back to the local population by satellite or facsimile, shaping the perceptions and actions of the local participants. Lederman says that in the case of the *intifada*, this feedback caused Palestinians to realize that had carried their cause to the highest echelons of the American administration, adding further momentum to the uprising. Meanwhile, television images created pressure in the US for immediate action, resulting, in this instance, in Secretary of State George Schultz's ill-fated peace mission. The media helps to make revolution in foreign lands, then walks away to leave the consequences to the local people.

While *Battle Lines* is bound to create controversy, it would be a shame if the debate focussed only on Lederman's political interpretations to the exclusion of his piercing analysis of the relationships between the media and policy-makers. — *Deirdre Collings*

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