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The past few months should have finally shattered the persistent illusion that the Israeli-Palestinian question determines all in the Middle East. In an essay in Foreign Policy magazine titled “The False Religion of Middle Peace,” former diplomat Aaron David Miller recounts the conventional wisdom running back through the Cold War: “An unresolved Arab-Israel conflict would trigger Russian war, increase Soviet influence, weaken Arab moderates, strengthen Arab radicals, jeopardize access to Middle East oil, and generally undermine U.S. influence from Rabat to Karachi.”

Behind these assumptions has long stood a deeply simplistic understanding of the Arabs. Professional naïf Jimmy Carter insists, “There is no doubt: The heart and mind of every Muslim is affected by whether or not the Israeli-Palestinian issue is dealt with fairly.” This is reducive to the point of insult. Carter thinks that Muslims have no interior lives of their own, but are all dependent on the foreign-policy dispute that is unlikely to affect most of them directly in the least. He mistakes real people for participants in an endless Council of Europe convention. They are an Arab world suddenly fall in love with each other?

Yet the pull of the illusion is so powerful that even those who don’t profess to believe in it, like George W. Bush, even, actually get sucked in. Barack Obama came into office ready to deploy his charm and fulfill the millennia of promise of the peace process once and for all. He couldn’t even get the Palestinians to sit down to negotiate with the Israelis, in an unintended “reset” to the situation decades ago.

According to the illusion, the region should be viewed in its entirety, as a Jewish-Hawk, Arab-Perfidy and American Incompetence fool. It exploded for altogether different reasons. The need for Publix to formalize their agreements with the CIW and the FTGE to truly make the penny a reality seems nonsensical. The illusion will never die.

Richard Lowry is editor of the National Review

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

Today, March 31, is the birthday of Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers. He would have turned 84. His legacy of advancing justice for the men and women who harvest our nation’s crops continues through the work of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Collier County’s award-winning organization of tomato pickers.

Today also is the day several dozen members of the World Community of Reformed Churches—representing 80 million Christians worldwide, including the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ—are in Southwest Florida visiting the CWI. They were drawn here by the landmark agreement reached in November of 2010 between the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange and the CIW.

That agreement has become a true beacon of hope and a model for economic justice. So, that 90 percent of our state’s tomato harvesters now enjoy a strict code of conduct to protect their labor rights and an agreement also provides for a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program and a worker-to-worker education process as well as a penny-per-pound wage increase for tomatoes sold to participating retailers.

The WCRC’s newly elected president, Jerry Pillary of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, along with pastors, seminary professors, theologians and lay people from 16 different countries and six continents are meeting here to plan the WCRC’s economic justice work on an international level. They have asked to join with local farmworkers at 5 p.m. today in a peaceful demonstration in front of the Publix at Immokalee Road and Collier Boulevard. They hope to encourage Publix to accept the CIW’s invitation to talk, to at last break bread together with the admirable aim of ensuring fair wages and safe work conditions for farmworkers be met.

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Florida tomato industry can be the pride of U.S. agriculture

Florida is more than willing to pay a penny more per pound...however, we will not pay employees of other companies directly for their labor.” Instead, Publix recommends that growers “put the cost of the tomatoes in the price they charge the industry for the goods.”

The CIW has clarified that in fact that’s exactly how the program works: “Backpackers charge the extra penny to the retail buyer and those funds are then accounted for and passed on to the growers. It is price-based for most buyers, excluding themselves prefer a different system, the Fair Food premium is built directly into the price.”

Publix’s declaration of a willingness to pay the penny if the way can be found “to renegotiate the agreements previously established” of company officials sitting down with the CIW to address the mechanics of passing the penny on to workers. Only through dialogue can the noble common objective of ensuring fair wages and safe work conditions for farmworkers be met.

We welcome the interest of the WCRC in their work for worker rights in Egypt. We rejoice in this opportunity to celebrate Mr. Chavez’ birthday. We further believe that in order for the agreement between the CIW and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange to continue we must embrace the code of conduct they claim to support, and to work together with the CIW and the FTGE to truly make the Florida tomato industry the pride of U.S. agriculture.

— Rev. Dr. Thomas Harp
Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Ron Patterson
Naples United Church of Christ

The death of an illusion

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