

THE *Economist* is one of my favourite international newsmagazine. A leading organ of imperialism and global capitalism, the paper is a highly informed and sophisticated defender of the "free market" economy and the political philosophy and social order that serve it. I like the weekly newsmagazine because it tries to uphold a core dictum of journalism: "facts are sacred, but opinions are free". The result is that, proceeding from the facts offered by *The Economist* in a given account, and invoking other background facts, one can reach conclusions different from those of the magazine. It tries not to present facts in such a way that they can only fit a preconceived ideological conclusion. A recent case is the death, on November 11, 2004, of Yasser Arafat, known to Palestinians as Abu Amar.

As expected, *The Economist* carried the news of the passing away of Yasser Arafat as cover story in its edition of November 13-19, 2004. You can see the interplay of "sacred facts" and "free opinions" in the three articles the paper carried on this sad event: Yasser Arafat: A well-timed exit (editorial opinion, page 11); Palestine and Israel: After one old man has died (news, page 48); Yasser Arafat: Leader of Palestinians (obituary, page 97). In the editorial opinion, *The Economist* said that "there are two reasons for thinking that Mr. Arafat could hardly have timed his exit better". I hope it would not amount to a distortion of the paper's view if I read "Arafat could not have timed his exit better" as "Arafat's death could not have been timed". The implication is clear.

The first reason offered by *The Economist* is that "Arafat's exit coincides with the re-entrance of Mr. Bush, at a time when Europeans and Arabs alike are imploring him (Bush) to deliver in his second term the statehood he promised the Palestinians in his first". In other words, the death of Arafat a few days after the reelection of President George Bush of America has improved the prospects of the emergence of the Palestinian state

Yasser Arafat and *The Economist*

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within four years, through the sole agency of the American presidency. In other words, again, Yasser Arafat had been the main "obstacle" on the road to Palestinian statehood! *The Economist* was careful in naming the global supplicants, those imploring the "almighty" George Bush to create the Palestinian State. The supplicants are the Europeans and the Arabs. Not Palestinians Arabs who are fighting for the state, but Arabs in general — including America's Arab "allies", "willing coalition partners" and "protectorates".

The other reason why Arafat's death could not have been better timed, according to *The Economist*, is that Arafat died "at a time of extraordinary political turmoil inside Israel". My reading of this statement, when put in context, is that with the "well-timed exit" of Yasser Arafat it is now possible to resolve the current "political turmoil" in Israel the advantage of the struggle for Palestinian statehood. If you remove the sole stumbling block on the road to peace and lasting settlement, and the sole cause of the political turmoil in Israel and in Palestine and between Jews and Palestinians, why will Palestinian dream not be realised immediately.

The Economist concluded the obituary segment of its Arafat Report with the following question: "So why, if Mr. Arafat was so bad at running things, taking his people eventually to catastrophe, was he still so honoured as a leader?" The magazine answered its own question: "The answer is that he, and he alone, stood for the courage and perseverance that the Palestinians show in their long, unfinished war with Israel". I leave it to readers to work out how someone who was "so bad at running things", and who took his people to "catastrophe", could, for so long — about 35 years — stand (virtually alone!) for his people's courage and persever-

ance. We can see a contradiction between "sacred facts" and "free opinion". In *The Economist* the latter sometimes borders on pure prejudice, a clear break between facts and opinions. But the paper always tries — though not always successfully — to balance its two commitments: promotion and defence of imperialism, global capitalism and market economy, on the one hand, and respect for facts, on the other.

This "balancing act" between fact and opinion, between truth, belief and wish, can be seen in the opening paragraph of the obituary: "In his dying, as in his life, Yasser Arafat seemed both dogged and indecisive. To the Palestinians, the people he led for so long, Mr. Arafat's flaws of character and leadership had been plain for years, yet were irrelevant. What mattered was that he personified their fight for freedom, kept their hopes and defied their enemies". Again, I leave it to readers to work out how Yasser Arafat came, or could have come, to personify their fight for freedom, kept their hopes and defied their enemies". Again, I leave it to readers to work out how Yasser Arafat came, or could have come, to personify his people's fight for freedom, kept their hopes, and defied their enemies, even when his "flaws of character and leadership" had been "plain for years". What can we say of a leader, or a leadership, whose "flaws of character and leadership" are so clear, but are considered irrelevant by his or her people? Put differently, what status do we ascribe to a leader's "flaws of character and leadership" when these are considered irrelevant by his people? Why was *The Economist* unable to say — unambiguously, without "on the one hand. On the other hand" — that Yasser Arafat was a great leader of his people?

Yasser Arafat was not a god; he was not

a saint. The type of struggle he led required neither a god nor a saint. All it required were good human beings, and beyond that, commitment, courage, selflessness and faith in the people, and honesty in dealing with them. As *The Economist* confirmed, Arafat's career as "Mr. Palestine" began in 1953, at the age of 24 years "when, as a student in Egypt, he wrote "Don't forget Palestine" in blood and presented the petition to General Neguib, Egypt's military leader". That was five years after the creation of the state of Israel and the forcible uprooting of Palestinians from their homeland. The paper did not explicitly say that the blood with which Arafat's petition was written was Arafat's own blood. But that was the case. Five years later, in Kuwait, "disenchanted with the Arab world's inability to do anything about Israel's 1948 conquest, he and close comrades formed the Fatah movement". *The Economist* testified: "From that moment, he was, in effect, the leader of Palestinian resistance".

The six-day Arab-Israeli war took place in 1967, and the Jewish state acquired more Arab lands and created additional millions of refugees. In 1969 Arafat became the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), a position he occupied until his death on November 11, 2004. With the agreements of the late 1980s and early 1990s between Israel and the PLO, the Palestinian Authority was created in the West Bank and Gaza, and Arafat became the president of this Palestinian "Bantustan".

This problem — ambivalence in acknowledging greatness — is not to be found only in *The Economist*. *The Time magazine* of November 22, 2004 presented Arafat's death to its readers in the words: "The death of an icon revives hope for a breakthrough in the Middle East";

"Even as Palestinians mourn the loss of their long-time leader, Yasser Arafat, his death may offer a fresh chance to realise the dream of a Palestinian state"; "The eternal agitator"; "Terrorist, freedom fighter, peace-maker — Arafat brought the Palestinian cause to the world's attention, but his defiance prevented him from reaching his goal"; "He articulated the Palestinian cause and won its legitimacy". The magazine concluded: "By the time of Arafat's death, a good number of his supporters had tired of his unflinching devotion to struggle. While few Palestinians thought their salvation would come through the kind of peace-making with Israel that Arafat's obstinacy had foreclosed, few thought he was leading them anywhere worth going. Despite the show of emotion after his death, many will greet his passing as much with quite relief as with sadness". You can feel the tension between truth and prejudice.

Yasser Arafat's biographers say he was born in Cairo on August 4, 1929, and that after the death of his mother in 1933, he was sent to live with an uncle in Jerusalem. Arafat accepted the date of birth but sometimes disputed the place of birth. He often said that he was born in Jerusalem and would love to be buried there. In the event, he died in Paris, had his funeral service in Cairo and was buried, not in Jerusalem, but near it, in Ramallah, his battered West Bank headquarters. Here, for the three years preceding his death, he was a prisoner, surrounded by Israeli army tanks. It is worthy of note that the Israeli state had, before Arafat took ill, vowed to expel him from Palestine, or to prevent him from returning to Palestine if he stepped out of it. The rulers of Israel did not also deny reports that they were planning to kill him. But when the fighter became ill, the Israeli government announced that Arafat was free to seek medical attention anywhere in the world, and return to his headquarters. Did the government know that Arafat would not return alive? My answer is "Yes".