

Dining With The Devil

BY MICHAEL ELLIOTT, columnist, **Time Magazine** April 22, 2002

It isn't only in Israel and the West Bank that bodies lie in the rubble streets. At the current rate of killing, an additional 30 or so Russian soldiers will have died in Chechnya by the time George W. Bush meets Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow at the end of May. Don't ask how many civilian Chechens die in the fighting each week. Nobody knows, though the number surely mounts as Moscow's long campaign to bludgeon Chechnya into submission proceeds unchecked.

It would be interesting to know what Bush plans to say about Chechnya at the summit. A reasonable guess would be: not much. Washington has pressing business to conduct with Putin, ranging from the latest round of NATO expansion to the conclusion of some sort of agreement on missile testing and the reduction of nuclear arsenals. Since Putin suffers perpetual criticism from the Russian security establishment for allowing the U.S. to do whatever it wants, Washington is unlikely to undercut him by making much of a fuss about atrocities in Chechnya.

In normal times, none of this would be remotely surprising. It is the way that great powers work. "American foreign policy," wrote National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in a 2000 Foreign Affairs article that became the template for the Bush approach, "should refocus on the national interest and the pursuit of key priorities." For this Administration, missile defense and NATO expansion are key priorities; the fate of Chechens is not. But these are not normal times, and after Sept. 11, the pursuit of the national interest was, supposedly, suddenly invested with another characteristic. In a phrase that Rice herself has used approvingly, Bush's policy was said to demonstrate a "moral clarity." In the war on terrorism, nations were either with the U.S. or against it; three rogue states constituted an "axis of evil." As recently as April 4, Bush was insisting--and this is about as clear as moral clarity

can be--that "no nation can negotiate with terrorists."

He knows better now. The U.S. is negotiating with terrorists, for few can doubt that Yasser Arafat has, at the very least, endorsed the use of suicide bombs against Israeli civilians. "The broad, sweeping pledges made by the President have bumped into reality," says Henry Hyde, Republican chairman of the House International Relations Committee. For the Bush Administration to talk to Arafat proves, as a senior European diplomat puts it, that "the period of relative simplicity when the line between good and evil could be drawn with confidence has ended." The moral-clarity crowd--from American conservatives to Israeli politicians like Benjamin Netanyahu--spent last week lamenting this new drift in American policy.

But sometimes it is the duty of political leaders to sup with the devil. Many national-liberation struggles, not excepting Israel's fight for existence in the 1940s, have seen violence against civilians: think Ireland or Kenya. Such outrages cannot be a reason for never talking to those responsible for them, for, inconveniently, those individuals may also be--as Arafat is--the authentic leaders of their people. That is why the Sri Lankan government is about to begin peace talks with the Tamil Tigers, a group whose long use of indiscriminate terror, child soldiers, suicide bombs and assassination makes Palestinian radicals look tame. In 1995 it was the pressing American national interest to end the war in Bosnia that threatened to sunder the Atlantic alliance. To reach that goal, Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. negotiator, enlisted the support of Slobodan Milosevic. The Serb leader is a monster who is currently standing trial in the Hague for war crimes. Moral clarity, presumably, would have suggested that the U.S. follow some other course. And it is true that Bosnia today is not Kansas. But, as Holbrooke says, and is entitled to say, "the war is over."

America's national interest now lies in finding ways to reduce the level of violence in the Middle East and move Israel and the Palestinians

toward a political settlement. This is not "rewarding terrorism." It is, rather, a recognition that until Palestinian aspirations are satisfied, the Middle East won't find stability and the U.S. won't find allies--either among Arab nations or in Europe--for taking action to remove Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction from Iraq.

Moral clarity in foreign policy is a virtue, as all but the most cynical, superior Europeans would concede. The blunt language that Bush used after Sept. 11 sent a message, and it was heeded. Countries like Pakistan and Yemen were left in no doubt as to where their interests lay, and they acted accordingly. But in the muddled, shades-of-gray world of great-power politics, neither moralism nor clarity can ever be enough. That lesson the Bush Administration has now learned. Pity about Chechnya.