
SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

THE KUWAITI EXCEPTION

by Daniel Pipes

Kuwait City

It all started with the anguished complaints I read in the Kuwaiti press in late 1985. They made no sense at the time: how could it be that American officials were pressuring the Kuwaiti government to release convicted terrorists, contradicting everything that was then known about U.S. policy? Unable to figure out what to make of these reports, I filed them away.

A year later, of course, they made sense. When the U.S. arms-for-hostages deals with Iran became public, I retrieved the Kuwaiti reports and published an article in the *Wall Street Journal* telling how the United States government had tried to spring convicted terrorists. The article also noted that the Kuwaiti authorities had resisted our efforts as well as a wide range of terrorist challenges—including an attack on their oil facilities and an attempt to assassinate the Kuwaiti ruler. I compared Kuwait's actions favorably with the empty bluster about terrorism coming from U.S., Israeli, and West European officials—all of whom had recently appeased terrorists. I ended the article with a salute to the true Arab honor of the Kuwaiti emir.

It had not occurred to me that Kuwaitis would take note of the piece. But they did; it became the leading news item in Kuwait a few days later. *As-Siyasa*, for example, had a banner headline across the front page, "Emir Jaber Only Ruler Refusing Deal With Terrorists: Stand Represents True Arab Honor." Other papers followed suit. "Accounts of the column reverberated on state-run television and radio for two days," said the *Washington Post*, "while minimal official notice was taken of President Reagan's personal letter to Emir Jaber Sabah." Abuse us as they may, I thought, but foreign governments continue to set great store by the views of Americans. I filed these clippings away as a curiosity and forgot the incident. It came as a surprise when a letter from the Kuwaiti ambassador in Washington arrived, inviting me to visit his country as a guest of the

minister of information. Long curious to see the place, I accepted.

Traveling from the United States, one reaches Kuwait from the northwest, across the huge, uninhabited Arabian desert. After two hours of nothing but blank terrain only in the last seconds before touchdown does one finally catch the blue sea and the angular irregularities of a gray, anonymously modern city.

This impression is confirmed by a drive through Kuwait City, where 90 percent of Kuwait's residents live. The roadways are enormous, efficient, and clean; the stores, brightly lit and modern. But virtually every trace of the older buildings, city walls, and roads has been obliterated, leaving the city without character. Anything more than twenty years old is antique. To imagine Kuwait, forget bazaars, citadels, crowded roads; this place resembles Houston much more than the ancient cities of the Middle East. And the similarity of the two goes beyond architecture and city planning: Kuwait shares with Houston a scorching climate and an almost complete absence of evident history. Both rose with the oil boom of the 1970s and both suffer from the glut of the eighties.

What is of real interest in Kuwait—and what makes it most unlike Houston—is its population. Geography and history pale beside the country's unique economic and social life. Until the 1940s, the Kuwaitis lived in a backwater delineated by Islam, the desert, pearl diving, fishing, and a bit of trade. Then oil suddenly thrust Kuwaitis into the world economy, made them rich, gave them power, and deluged them with Western culture. Consequently, I expected Kuwait to be a dull, parasitical society, where foreign workers do all the work, citizens lounge in decadent luxury, and nothing serious happens. My expectations were not entirely off the mark, but the country has its attractions nonetheless.

The first thing to know about Kuwait, of course, is that it has an immense reserve of oil under its sands. Those reserves are currently estimated at 10 million metric tons, the second largest in the world, after Saudi Arab-

ia's 16 million tons. (The United States has only 4 million tons.) The second thing to know is that it is non-Kuwaitis who explore, drill, refine, transport, and consume this oil. Kuwaitis contribute little but raw material to the industry that sustains them.

Oddly enough, however, the unearned quality of Kuwait's money has hardly affected the country's consciousness. A swirl of activity—a war to discuss, business to transact, parties to attend, consumer items to enjoy—makes the contingency of their affluence a distant and rather theoretical point. Were a visitor to arrive in Kuwait not knowing the source of its wealth, he might not catch on for months.

The demographics of Kuwait are unusual, to say the least. Citizens number only 600,000; expatriate laborers total twice that. Recent figures indicate that 82 percent of the work force is foreign; even among government employees (the favorite occupation of the citizenry), two-thirds are foreign. Further, these workers keep easy work hours; in theory, offices are open from 7:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., when they close for the day, but I never got an appointment before 10 a.m.

Foreign workers come from 130 countries and divide themselves along occupational lines. In the Meridien Hotel where I stayed, for instance, Egyptians and Lebanese worked the front desk (they speak Arabic, English, and French), Filipinos served food, and Indians cleaned the rooms. Few non-Arab workers speak Arabic, but almost all of them speak English, and they are so numerous that English has become a lingua franca. Indeed, a Kuwaiti who cannot speak English is at a severe disadvantage when he wants to make a purchase, give orders to his servant, or even lodge a complaint with the police. No wonder he feels culturally threatened and bemoans the presence of foreigners even as he enjoys the benefits of their labor.

Having Kuwaiti citizenship is tantamount to holding an aristocratic title. What Aristotle wrote about every man needing a slave applies to Kuwait, except that every man, woman, and child in effect has two servants. Citizens exclude a sense of well-being and superiority, of confidence and ease in com-

mand; they are used to giving orders and being given the best in return.

It is the ultimate *rentier* society. Unlike other OPEC members, which still depend on oil sales for income, the Kuwaitis have salted away so much that they now derive more from investments than from oil revenues, which allows them to endure a downturn better than other exporting states. Never before in history has an entire population depended financially primarily on investments; never before has a whole country enjoyed the benefits of wealth before learning the skills that created that wealth. One can look at Kuwait as a very expensive experiment for social scientists to study; even better, as a unique creation waiting to be explored and explained by novelists.

Kuwait has a real, if discreet, political life centered on the traditional institution called the *diwaniya*. Any man with the means can build himself a *diwaniya*, a large room with chairs and sofas around the edges where most evenings he holds an open house for male Kuwaiti citizens. The crowd a *diwaniya* attracts depends on the standing of the host. Gossip, jokes, storytelling, and deal-making take up much of the time, but politics is the pervasive theme. The *diwaniyas* are the courts of public opinion in Kuwait. They have no official standing or power, of course, but they do provide a mechanism for the transfer of information and the exchange of opinions. In a society of aristocrats, surrounded by predatory neighbors and out-numbered by aliens, these opinions count.

I left Kuwait with two dominant impressions. First, enormous wealth permits Kuwaitis to enjoy an unusual degree of confidence in their relationship to Western civilization. In this they resemble the Japanese. Never mind that Japan got where it is through indigenous effort and Kuwait got it all from payments for oil; the result is similar. Both are free to choose on their own terms what they like from the West; absent is that sense of persistent pressure that so afflicts the poor countries. The result is a fluency in moving back and forth between cultures, and an easy openness toward Westerners.

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It also means that Kuwaitis, like Japanese, can preserve what they wish of their own culture. The men wear the characteristically flowing Arabian gowns and have not gone over to shirts and pants as in the rest of the Middle East. The sexes continue to live separate lives and are not pushed together by economic dictates. The *diwaniya* remains strong. And Kuwaitis, urban descendants of the Bedouin tent-dwellers, continue to cherish desert life, often spending vacations encamped in the sands.

Second, I finally understood why generations of Britons and Americans have found societies of the deserts seductive. (This had never been apparent to me from three years of living in Cairo, a much more profound but at the same time a far more Westernized city.) The Bedouins' upper-class demeanor contrasts strikingly with the hum-drum of democratic ways. Rulers are generous in a style reminiscent of *A Thousand and One Nights*. In Kuwait the old saw about the American who told the sheikh how much he admired the sheikh's golf clubs—and then received not a bag of golf clubs but the deed to an 18-hole golf club—hardly seems like an exaggeration.

My host, the minister of information, is a member of the ruling family (they avoid the term "royalty" in Kuwait) and a potential ruler of the country. Known as Sheikh Nasir, he is an outgoing and energetic aristocrat—the very model of an Arabian leader. He arranged for everything with a lavish hand: car, driver, and escort the whole time, a full schedule of meetings with cabinet ministers and other notables, invitations to public and private parties. The sheikh hosted a grand Bedouin-style lunch for me in the desert and then heaped gifts at my departure. On a more mundane level, the typical formal dinner I attended (for men only, of course) offered ten times more food than could possibly be eaten; as a result, half the dishes returned to the kitchen untouched. Those of us who trudge to the grocery store every week cannot help but feel giddy at this extravagance.

The ultimate question to ask about Kuwait and the other oil-exporting countries is: What have they to show for the hundreds of billions of dollars extracted at great pain from much of the world's population?

So far, the results are meager. The achievement amounts to making the good life available in one of the most inhospitable regions on earth. Goods are snapped up from the ultra-fashionable luxury stores with branches in Rome, New York, and Kuwait. Food comes from, among other places, New

Zealand, the Sudan, France, and Argentina. Air conditioning is ubiquitous. There are more cars with telephones here than in Manhattan.

But is there anything beyond the fine buildings, the brand names, and the servants? Yes. There are ambitions to accomplish something, to have a constructive role. This means building a university, an institute for scientific research, a museum, a hospital special-

izing in Islamic medicine (whatever that may be—no one could explain the concept to me), and the like. Education has flowered; to my surprise, Kuwait has some sophisticated intellectuals. Indeed, with the demise of Lebanon, Kuwait has become an important cultural center for all Arabic-speaking countries. The best of the Middle East drifts to the oil-producing states for work, interesting foreign visitors pass

through, and many citizens travel abroad. The most widely read Arabic magazine, *Al-Arab*, comes from Kuwait and the Arabic version of "Sesame Street" originates here.

Although consumerism prevails, there is a chance—a better one than I would have guessed from a distance—that something worthwhile will come of this very expensive experiment. □

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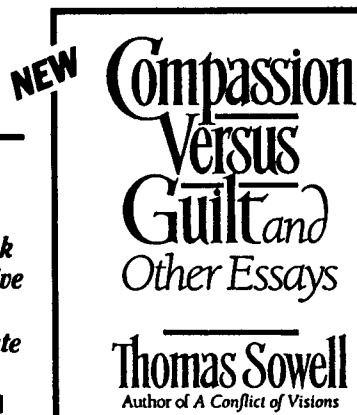
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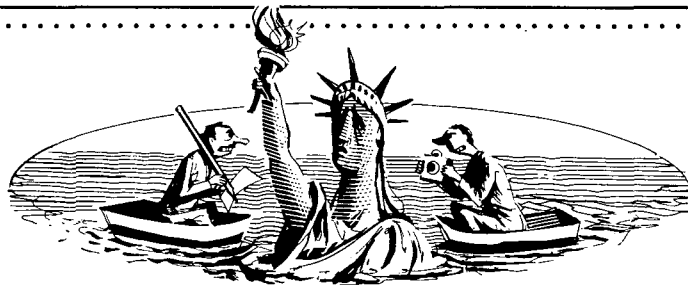
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PRESSWATCH



DEADLY REMINDERS

by Michael Ledeen

Let us not forget, the media have become part of government in this country (and in most other Western countries as well), but with

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certain significant differences:

- No accountability: journalists and editors are not elected, don't have to undergo grueling interrogations by congressional committees, don't have to submit to investigations for security clearances.

- No disclosure: the Freedom of Information Act doesn't apply to media

(or Congress, for that matter), and Shield Laws guarantee journalists absolute (or near-absolute) protection of sources and methods.

- The need to kill: the media were elevated to governmental status after they brought down Nixon. Ever since they have had to remind the other branches of government that the media can kill, and the most effective reminder is murder-by-press.

Every now and then, there are little rumbles of discontent from other branches of the government, or even from the public, and the media's most common response is to remind the world how dangerous it is to mess with the press. The Reminder of the Month comes from Jonathan Alter ("with Howard Fineman") in the February 8 issue of *Newsweek* about the Bush-Rather altercation:

There's another risk to attacking the press. When bitten, the media has a habit of biting back, which Bush may find costly. CBS, for instance, is hardly likely to let the ball drop on Iran-contra, and only partly because it smells an important story. And *Newsweek*? Roger Ailes, still angry at this magazine for its "Fighting the 'Wimp Factor'" cover story on Bush in October, said last week: "Here's a quote I bet you won't use. 'Roger Ailes refused to cooperate with *Newsweek*, saying, 'I saw what you did to the vice president.''" But Ailes may be forgetting a line from his own book, which, for better or for worse, reveals something unchangeable about the role of the media in public life: "Hostility is a no-win strategy with the press—they have the last word."

Terrorism

High marks, as usual, to the *Wall Street Journal's* John Walcott for his fascinating story on how the American legal system ties itself in knots attempting to deal with terrorists. You may recall some time ago there were celebrations in the Justice Department for the arrest, in Venezuela, of a Mr. Mahmoud el-Abed Ahmad, who is accused by the government of Israel of being a leading member of the Abu Nidal terrorist organization. Mr. Ahmad is now in jail in New York, and his lawyer—can you guess?—Ramsey Clark, is arguing—can you guess?—that his client's ac-

tivities are "political," not criminal, and that he thus should not be extradited to Israel.

Walcott observes, correctly, that "a ruling that Mr. Ahmad cannot be extradited because he was brought to justice improperly or because his acts were political would be a major blow to the Reagan administration's efforts to collar suspected terrorists overseas and bring them to the U.S. for trial or extradition." And he tells us, *en passant*, that the Justice Department has dropped its arrest warrant for Abu Abbas, the man who directed the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* back in 1985. Why? Justice Department spokesman Patrick Korten says that "we don't have the evidence to win in an American court."

I doubt it. I worked all night to put together the evidence required to convince a federal judge to issue the arrest warrant in the first place, and the evidence is mighty impressive. It includes ship-to-shore communications in which Abu Abbas gave instructions to the terrorists on board the ship, and all that intelligence was declassified so that the judge would know it would be introduced into evidence at a trial. So I should hope that some of our investigative journalists will get on this case, and ask Attorney General Meese about the grounds on which his department has elected to drop its charges against Mr. A.A. They might also ask Mr. Meese to explain how it is that Italian justice has sentenced A.A., and we don't find the case convincing enough to stand by our arrest warrant. And while they're at it, why don't they ask the State Department what ever happened to that White Paper that was prepared on the activities of Abu Nidal. According to my friends in government, the department didn't want to slow down the engine of détente, and the White Paper would have shown a whole series of relations between Abu Nidal and East European countries (the same ones about which Deputy Secretary of State Whitehead constantly says "they're moving our way"). Perhaps there is a pattern of

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