

GRAND TOUR

Bully Pulpit

By Bruce W. Cook



Many of us living in this free and great United States of America find it hard to believe that bigotry and hatred still infect world events. Infect is the word of choice. Effect would be far too kind a word for hatred is surely an infection.

We struggle with the thought that some people would blow up an aircraft filled with innocent travelers. We wonder how our neighbors, seemingly

docile folks, could be in fact members of anti-American organizations, yet still live on our common soil, send their children to our schools, dine at the next table at the corner cafe and ask the town doctor to cure their ills.

It is a testament to the American model that we want to believe in the goodness of all men. We want to believe that our strength is in our diversity. Yet we must be mindful of the existence of blind hatred in our midst. To overcome its wrath, we must begin with ourselves. Each of us must examine our prejudices.

Six weeks ago actor Mel Gibson told the highway patrol officer arresting him one night on Malibu's Pacific Coast Highway for allegedly driving under the influence, that "all wars have been started by Jews." Given Gibson's celebrity status he actually told the whole world, not just the officer. Gibson's vitriolic hatred of Jews, expressed under the influence of alcohol, is a prime example of the poison that infects the world. I don't remember Jews starting the Vietnam War, do you? No doubt Jews were the driving force behind the American Revolution as well.

Bigotry and hatred are at the root of thousands of years of conflict. It was only recently that the Vatican officially denounced hatred of Jews. For two thousand years Pope to Bishop to parish priest instructed congregants to hate the Jews, the Christ killers. Such prejudice is not easily washed away and forgotten, certainly not by Mel Gibson.

My paternal grandmother who was Catholic, told my mother who was Jewish, that as a young girl growing up in Boston the nuns taught her to spit on the steps of the synagogue when she passed on the way to church. Now that's charming behavior, infused with a not-so-subliminal dose of hate, taught to a child, an impressionable child, by respected if not revered adult role models.

We look at events in the Middle East and wonder how the violence will ever end. Sadly, the answer is that it may never cease as long as the hatred continues to poison the region. Each new generation of children in the largely illiterate Arab world is raised to hate Jews, hate Israel and hate America. Proverbially speaking, like my grandmother, they are taught to spit on the steps of the synagogue and burn the American flag. Some grow up to

become suicide bombers killing civilians in the name of Allah.

The Jewish religion is the father of Islam, as well as Christianity, and the similarities between these faiths are profound and inspiring. How is this lost in real life translation? The real world model is one of kill and conquer, and kill and conquer again. Build the city or the empire—sack the city, take over the empire. Maybe it's not about religion at all, maybe it's just about power and land, control and greed. Religion is just the excuse to kill. What a concept.

Every American must face their own demons of hatred and prejudice. Consider some horrific generalizations. You hate the Jews, you hate the Muslims, you hate the Catholic church, you hate the Christians pushing their right of center political and personal agendas, the Mexicans crossing the borders, the Asians infiltrating the schools and job market, the African American men that seem to be robbing every 7-11 across the nation as portrayed in the video surveillance tapes on the evening news.

Replacing ignorance with dialogue is key to change. I am not just talking about 'touchy-feely – everyone is wonderful – kumbaya' dialogue. I'm talking about going beyond political correctness to find truth – calling actions what they are, whether good, bad or otherwise. Facing reality one situation at a time without coloring the truth with the broad brush of prejudice.

Whatever your position on the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq, or dealing with current terrorist threats, the American government stands as a beacon in a hateful world, diffusing the blind bigotry that labels people unjustly and without reason. We do not propagate hatred of all Muslims, or any group for that matter. From our nation's capitol to the pulpits of small town churches, most leaders call for restraint and understanding. This is America's highest standard.

Let us each adopt this standard as our personal goal. It is the foundation of freedom, the most important attribute of democracy. Let us never be afraid to speak out, criticize, and discuss the issues that confront us, mindful of the fact that evil does exist, and that not all people seek a righteous path. Yet, such demons are generally found in individuals, not entire races or religions, societies or cultures.

Next time you are inclined to voice generic prejudice when frustrated with the actions of a few, remember that hatred is the root of evil. Imagine a time when peace takes hold in the Middle East. Terror will cease when good men take action to end the hatred. It begins with you and it begins with me, just as it begins with every man, woman and child in Lebanon, in Israel, in Iraq and everywhere that hostility is fostered by ignorance. **GT**

Bruce Cook is the creator of Grand Tour Magazine. He is a twice-weekly columnist for the Los Angeles Times/Daily Pilot, and serves as Editor of the prestigious Bay Window Magazine. Cook has been heard on San Diego radio for the past five years, and is an Emmy-nominated television writer and producer responsible for such programs as Entertainment Tonight.