

U.S. Withdrawal from Racism Conference— Ethical Stand or Defensive Maneuver?

President Bush and the House agreed Secretary of State Colin Powell should not attend the U.N. racism conference in Durban, South Africa, because of Israel being singled out for criticism. According to Bush, "We have made it very clear . . . we will have no representative there so long as they pick on Israel."

This was presented as an ethical stand. Rationale for the walk-out by the lower-level U.S. delegation that did attend was that the conference had been "hijacked by Arab nations" proposing "hateful language" toward Israel, dooming the conference.

Rather than an ethical stand, I think that withholding Powell's participation in favor of lower-level team, and the team's eventual walk-out, are each a defensive maneuver where one person or group can withdraw from an interaction while blaming the other for their absence—in this case the Arab countries.

Does such withdrawal even achieve the stated goal? Bush referred to Israel as being a "strong ally." Everything I know about being an ally means speaking up for a person or group in any ethical way I could.

Not showing up when someone is going to be verbally assaulted is not my idea of an ethical way to help a "friend." Leaving my friend to face the onslaught alone would be a betrayal.

Secondly, it seems illogical to think Israel would be better helped by a less powerful U.S. delegation.

Finally, by leaving, the U.S. created a greater chance that the declaration would pass with language that labels Zionism as inherently racist. The final declaration requires consensus. If the U.S. stayed, we could have set limits, "If any country is singled out in the document, we won't sign it."

If withdrawal takes support away from Israel instead of providing it, then the question becomes "*What is the reason for such a persistent drive to withdraw?*"

Whenever we use defensive maneuvers, some form of self-protection, manipulation, and/or avoidance of accountability is usually taking place. Some suggest that Bush wanted to avoid discussion of apologies and

reparations for U.S. slavery, as well as other issues for which he has come under international criticism.

Even if Bush and other politicians genuinely believe a boycott constitutes “taking a stand,” I think it’s an ineffective approach. It lacks the power to deal effectively with the complexity and magnitude of the international conflicts we face.

The U.S. approach consistently focused on blaming Arab countries for our efforts to withdraw, even using inflammatory terrorist labels such as “hijacking” when Palestinians are also desperate for help. I believe this further polarizes Israel and Palestine.

Representatives came to this conference from countries all over the world—people who have courage, skill, and dedication to healing wounds that tear apart the fabric of our humanity. Beyond not being present for Israel, our leaders also turned their official backs on this international community, refusing to stay in the dialogue.

I think a crucial issue here is learning how to communicate in the midst of great conflict and pain without accelerating power struggle. Such dialogue is never easy; it is a long-term process. Even if *no* resolution had come out of the conference, it was a beginning to an essential conversation about how racism is pandemic and affects every person on earth.

My hope for us, as Americans, is that we will call upon ourselves and our politicians to respond with a more evolved and mature leadership. Using a non-defensive approach, leaders can show up at the table, stay there, listen well, state their positions with clarity and eloquence, and examine their own, as well as others’, accountability. After that comes the ability to find solutions.

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