



HEADLINE SPONSOR | E-MAIL UPDATE | MP MOBILE | SUBSCRIPTIONS | SITE MAP | ADVERTISE | CONFERENCES & EVENTS | USER HELP

Wednesday »

14-DAY SEARCH: National Post GO YellowPages.ca Canada

NEW & UPDATED:

Best of Summer: Vancouver

Confessions of a principal

Column

NATIONAL POST HOME

NATIONAL NEWS

WORLD NEWS

FINANCIAL POST

FP INVESTING

COMMENTARY

SCIENCE & TECH

ARTS & LIFE

SPORTS

DIVERSIONS

WEEKLY FEATURES

SATURDAY POST

POST MOVIES

REVIEW

TRAVEL

DRIVER'S EDGE

POST HOMES

SPECIALS

SPECIAL REPORTS

INSIDE ENTERTAINMENT

NP BUSINESS MAGAZINE

FORUMS

CONTESTS

TECHNOLOGY

HEALTH

CLASSIFIEDS

AUTOS

SHOPPING

PERSONALS

UTILITIES

canada.com

POST VOTE

NATIONAL POST

NATIONAL POST

WAKE UP INSPIRED

SUBSCRIBE TO

NATIONAL POST

NATIONAL POST

POST VOTE

SEARCH RESULTS - STORY

Shilling for the House of Saud Former U.S. ambassadors have become Saudi Arabia's apologists

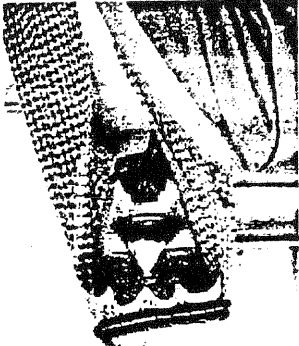
Matt Welch
National Post

LOS ANGELES - It has been another dreadful month for United States-Saudi Arabia relations. On Aug. 6, word leaked out that senior Defence Department officials had been recently advised by Laurent Murawiec of the Rand Corporation that "Saudis are active at every level of the terror chain," and represent "the kernel of evil, the prime mover [and] the most dangerous opponent" in the Middle East (as opposed to, say, Iraq).

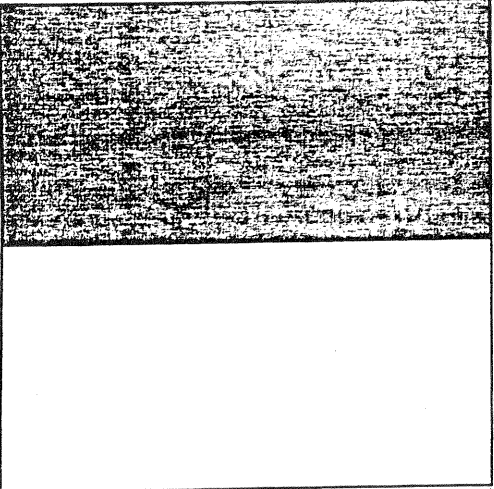
Nine days later, 600 relatives of Sept. 11 victims filed a US\$1-trillion federal lawsuit against various Saudi princes, charities and banks, claiming they helped fund Osama Bin Laden and the World Trade Center massacre.

This past week, more than 100 Saudi scholars issued a joint statement saying Israel and the United States were part of an "axis of evil." Then, on Wednesday, the Financial Times reported Saudis had withdrawn US\$100-billion to US\$200-billion worth of investment from the United States in the past year, in large part

Crown Prince Abdullah has a defender...



ADVERTISEMENT



ame

Click Here

MOV

for B

M

H

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

S

POST VOTE

» TODAY'S VOTE:

Should there be mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods in Canada?

[CLICK TO VOTE](#)

because of growing political tensions.

With each deteriorating week, as in the 49 previous weeks, a curious cadre of Americans has stood up to defend the oppressive House of Saud against its critics in the democratic United States. No, it is not the academic multiculturalists, or the effete bi-coastal elites -- still favourite whipping boys, nearly a year later, of those agitating for the next U.S. war.

The real apologists have far more influence and access to power than all that, earned through decades of high-profile government employment. They are the former U.S. ambassadors to Saudi Arabia, and they have carved out a fine living insulting their own countrymen while shilling for one of the most corrupt regimes on Earth.

The morning after The Washington Post revealed the "kernel of evil" briefing, ex-Saudi ambassador Walter Cutler (who served two separate terms in Riyadh) and former deputy chief of mission Edward "Ned" Walker (who has also been ambassador to Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Israel) tag-teamed on National Public Radio's Talk of the Nation program to swat down the latest Saudi-bashing.

Cutler, president of the non-profit Meridian International Center -- of which Saudis have been "very supportive" financially, he told The Washington Post in February -- said: "I don't think this is the time to reassess the basics of the relationship.... They have been very sensitive about appearing to be too beholden to the great power, and this is for domestic reasons, which I think are understandable." Walker, the president of the Middle East Institute, which he told The Washington Post received \$200,000 of its US\$1.5-million budget last year from Saudi donors, was also understanding. "I don't think you can condemn an entire people for the acts of a few citizens," he said. "By no means is Saudi [Arabia] necessarily the worst when you start looking around the world."

When a caller expressed frustration at the yawning gap between President George W. Bush's rhetoric about "truth and justice" and the Saudi government's "dictatorial" record, Walker chose to look on the bright side: "I spoke to a senior Saudi prince the other day, and he was talking about this very problem, something that the senior members of the family understand. And he said that he would be willing to bet that within 10 years, they will have free elections in Saudi Arabia. That's a pretty profound statement for somebody in the ruling family."

What might be even more profound is the path by which a life-long member of the U.S. diplomatic corps could come to find it impressive that the earliest a totalitarian government could even ponder free elections would be a decade from now. A clue into that journey can be found in the phrase, "I spoke to a senior Saudi prince."

U.S. ambassadors, current and former, are forever gleaming their primary information from the ever-growing ranks of Saudi princes (at least 6,000 at last count), who dominate the government and

WEATHER

Select

STOCK QUOTE

ISE ▲

Dow ▲

S&P ▲

500 ▲

Nasdaq ▲

C\$ (in US\$) ▲

elite business class. That is in large part because many Saudi princes speak English, while U.S. ambassadors, at the direct behest of the House of Saud, do not speak Arabic. (New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman reported last October that King Fahd had persuaded former U.S. president Ronald Reagan in 1988 to withdraw his recently appointed Arabic-speaking ambassador, Hume Horan, and that "ever since then, we've been sending non-Arabic-speaking ambassadors to Riyadh -- mostly presidential cronies who knew exactly how to penetrate the White House but didn't have a clue how to penetrate Saudi Arabia.")

When you do not speak Arabic, and your movements are curtailed (U.S. diplomats are forbidden to visit Mecca, for example, even if they happen to be Muslim), it is inevitable that you would begin seeing Saudi conditions and even Mideast politics through the eyes of the only people you can communicate with. Foreign service veterans know the condition of "clientitis" can affect diplomats in any post, let alone one with such a bizarre combination of oil-interest realpolitik, close historic ties and a formal chasm between the rulers and the ruled.

By all accounts, the smartest of the princes are a worldly and self-aware bunch, winking and nudging about all that strict Islamic stuff they broadcast to their subjects, while enjoying the more secular debaucheries to be found in such places as Miami, New York and Las Vegas. Surely, many are capable of smart talk about geopolitics into the wee hours.

Still, it is jarring to observe how closely the ex-ambassadorial rap about Crown Prince Abdullah resembles a slightly more dignified and coherent version of Dennis Hopper's sycophantic character in Apocalypse Now, describing the great and terrible Colonel Kurtz to Martin Sheen's Willard. "[Prince Abdullah's] unhappiness with Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, and now his real anguish over the humanitarian crisis they face, is very clear every time I speak with him," Richard Murphy, ambassador from 1981-1983, told the Christian Science Monitor on April 29.

"Anybody who thinks the Saudi Crown Prince plays brinkmanship seriously misjudges him," Ned Walker warned the British weekly The Spectator after Bush met with Abdullah on April 25. Three weeks earlier, Walker had told The Baltimore Sun: "They may be misjudging Crown Prince Abdullah.... He's stared down secretaries of state in the past."

If you closed your eyes, you would think the person talking held a Saudi passport. "One of the things that the Crown Prince had been nervous about and concerned about for some time was that he wasn't getting his message through to the President," Walker told CNN on April 25. "He started some six months ago to warn the President about the impact on U.S. relations in the region if we didn't do something about the Israeli issue and the Palestinian problem. This message, hopefully, the President got and the President reassured the Crown Prince. That will help a lot."

Like Walker, Cutler and Murphy, former Saudi ambassadors Wyche Fowler (1996-2001) and Charles "Chas" Freeman (1989-1992) can be counted on to deliver quotes consistent with Saudi foreign policy - opposed to invading Iraq, unequivocally impressed by the "Saudi Peace Plan," hostile toward Israel! Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and

the "Israeli lobby" in Washington, more sympathetic toward Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians than the Bush administration, and insistent that the Israel/Palestine conflict is the root cause of much of the Arab world's unrest. What is more surprising is how they cross the line into defending the indefensible.

When Richard Murphy, who is a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and an advisory committee member for a new billion-dollar Saudi-dominated Islamic bank in Bahrain, was asked at a May 22 House of Representatives hearing about an article written by the Saudi ambassador to England about George Bush's "Freudian problems," he made sure to mention "this man considers himself an outstanding satirist." Murphy has also defended Saudi Arabia's donations to the families of suicide bombers. When CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked Wyche Fowler, who is board chairman of the Middle East Institute, about dress codes for American women when they venture off U.S. territory in the desert kingdom, the Clinton appointee breezily responded: "They wear what my mother and sister always wore on Wednesday and Friday night. They wear what amounts to a choir robe."

Unfortunately, the issue transcends the odd euphemism. There are a reported 92 children with U.S. passports living in Saudi Arabia against their will, according to House hearings on the subject in June, and the grieving American mothers blame the State Department and the U.S. embassy for not wanting to ruffie Saudi feathers to get the youngsters back.

"I hold Wyche Fowler responsible for both of my daughters being married," Pat Roush, whose children were kidnapped by her estranged Saudi former husband 16 years ago at ages 7 and 3, respectively, told MSNBC's Chris Matthews on June 11. Fowler, Roush said, showed no interest in completing a complicated deal worked out by his predecessor to return her girls.

She reiterated her accusations the following day in a sworn statement before a Congressional committee. "He dismissed me like an impertinent schoolgirl who was way out of line by even speaking to him," she said. "Wyche Fowler was in Saudi Arabia for six years. He lobbied hard for that job and made a lot of money. He is now the grand statesman about town -- the Mideast expert and chairman of the board of the Mid East Institute. He gives speeches, goes to dinner parties and I am sure has many Saudi friends. He appears on television as an expert on Saudi Arabia.... He should be held responsible for what he did to my family. He is a criminal."

To say the United States has an unusual relationship with Saudi Arabia is a pretty radical understatement. The country, as most of us have learned by now, has a quarter of the world's known oil reserves and three-quarters of the world's known Sept. 11 hijackers. Its homegrown Wahhabist Islam can be found in the soil anywhere al-Qaeda grows, yet the House of Saud lives in fear of Osama bin Laden. Even though Saudi Arabia has only 23 million people, the United States operates two regional consulates there, more than it maintains in much larger countries such as Indonesia (population 228 million), Bangladesh (131 million), Nigeria (127 million), Egypt (70 million), Spain (40 million) and more than a dozen others. Riyadh has conducted literally hundreds of billions of dollars worth of

business with the United States, especially in sectors well known to the Bush administration and family: oil, construction and defence.

All of which may help explain why the administration goes into spasms whenever pressed on its Saudi policies. When Congressman Dan Burton made repeated inquiries into the State Department's Visa Express program, which allowed three of the 19 hijackers to enter the country without so much as an embassy interview, bureaucrats wrote e-mails calling him a "neo-Nazi." Reporter Joel Mowbray of the right-leaning National Review magazine, whose aggressive reporting on the Visa Express system led to its recent suspension, was physically detained after a State Department press conference in which he admitted possessing mildly confidential embassy correspondence.

But the most obnoxious recent response may well have come from the new ambassador to Saudi Arabia: Robert Jordan, a Texas lawyer who has represented the Bush family in Middle Eastern oil deals. On the same day (June 25) that Dubya unveiled his Mideast peace plan calling for sweeping democratic reforms of the Palestinian Authority (the likes of which have never been contemplated in Riyadh), Jordan penned a condescending op-ed in the Dallas Morning News admonishing Americans for criticizing the House of Saud so harshly. "If we strike out blindly against perceived enemies and undermine the ability of our friends to work with us against the scourge of global terrorism, we will have a lot to answer for," Jordan warned. "Do we agree with the Saudis on every issue? No, of course not. If that were the criterion for friendship with the United States, we wouldn't have a friend in the world."


Whatever real U.S.-Saudi diplomacy there is, is being conducted off-camera. Bush, Robert Jordan and the flock of former ambassadors seem to prefer it that way. But quietly looking the other way in the name of realpolitik while a "friend" oppresses its own people has its drawbacks, particularly when Saudi Arabia is guilty of many of the sins being pinned on such unfriendlies as Iraq, Taliban-era Afghanistan and Iran. The diplomatic status quo, whereby business is conducted in secret and scrutiny is shot down or punished, has sheltered a corrupt monarchy ruling an explosive country that exports the raw theological material for anti-U.S. Islamic terrorism.

Meanwhile, the Saudi-friendly elites in the United States continue to dine with the princes and mimic their arrogance. "I wish the Americans would see Arabs and Muslims the way I see them," Neil Bush, George's brother, said during a January junket in Jeddah. "But Arabs are losing the public relations battle in the United States." Ambassador Jordan, meanwhile, has been spending his time doing such things as bashing his home country's media, insisting the "moderate" House of Saud is a "friend," and launching initiatives to boost Saudi tourism to the United States.

Sounds as if he is auditioning for his next job.

© Copyright 2002 National Post

[Return to search results](#)

 Print Story

Send to a friend

