

## Predictable foolishness over the Holocaust...by Daniel Peters

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, December 18, 2006

<http://politicsrespun.org/2006/12/predictable-foolishness-over-the-holocaust/>

The typical responses to the Holocaust conference in Iran, while predictable, are inappropriate and counterproductive.

Absurdity is not a moral category. It is natural, and inevitable, that people will believe crazy things. Live with it. If I believe something that is wrong – even something that is *obviously* wrong (according to you) – that does not make me a bad person. And if my crazy belief happens to focus on a topic of great importance to a particular group of people, it does not follow that I have any special hatred toward that group.

Let me point out something so obvious, so self-evident, that it should not have to be said at all: *Denial of the Holocaust, in itself, is not an expression of hatred against Jews*. It is not an expression of intolerance, or of racism. It is merely (at worst) a stupid, and incorrect, assertion about history.

You may want to retort that the Holocaust deniers can be shown, on other grounds, to be haters of Jews. That is true of some of them, no doubt. But that observation is irrelevant to the question of whether Holocaust denial itself should be treated as intolerable. The rules of logic reject arguments of the form “*so-and-so is a bad person, hence what he says is false*”, and it is equally illogical to argue “*so-and-so is a bad person, hence what he says is evil*”. We can legitimately be outraged at hatred, but we ought to save such outrage for the times when that hatred is actually expressed.

Moreover – to repeat what I said in a previous article here – political opposition to an opinion about history conveys a dangerous message: *If the opinion must be suppressed politically, then perhaps it cannot be refuted rationally*. This is surely not the message we should be sending to any tender minds that may be in danger of being swayed by the Holocaust deniers! Holocaust denial feeds on such political opposition.

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There’s a wrinkle here, of course: The conference in Iran is not merely about history. It includes an anti-Israeli political agenda, clearly by design. But “anti-Israeli” does not equal “anti-Jewish” (let alone “anti-Semitic”). Moreover, there is nothing particularly sacred about the state of Israel. No modern nation-state is above criticism, and none should be immune to having the legitimacy of its existence questioned. (As a side comment, for what it’s worth: I consider Israel to have exactly the same right to exist that any other nation-state has.)

I am not, in any sense, a supporter of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. But I cannot help noticing that his opinions seem to be twisted relentlessly by his opponents. For example, people often say that he has “vowed” to destroy Israel, yet I’ve never seen such a vow in any direct quotation. (Can someone point me to one? I’d be interested in seeing it.) Ahmadinejad has, I think, stated that Israel “ought” to be destroyed; but there

is a world of difference between saying that something ought to happen and a vow to take violent action to make it happen. Even George W. Bush understands that difference!

What exactly does Ahmadinejad mean when he speaks of the destruction of Israel? His comments at the Holocaust conference are illuminating. He has described the destruction of Israel as “inevitable”. Notice, first, that this is not the language of a call to arms. (When a politician is trying to motivate people to take action toward a given goal, it is more typical to stress the possibility that the goal will *not* be reached if his audience fails to take action.) Moreover, he has said that Israel will be destroyed *in the same way that the Soviet Union was*. Now the way I recall it, the USSR did not fall to foreign invasion, nor to terrorism. Rather, there was a change of heart, a practical and sensible submission to the inevitable. That (very nearly) bloodless change of regime (along with its accompanying cartographic change) is the explicit model for the vision that Ahmadinejad offers.

It may be that Ahmadinejad’s real beliefs and real intentions are far more sinister. I do not know. But that is a different topic. I argue here only that his explicit statements – at least, the ones I know of – are far less offensive than is indicated by the responses of most Western politicians and editorialists, in their eagerness to display political piety.