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ON VIOLENCE IN AMERICA AND KUWAIT: THE KUWAIT-AMERICA FOUNDATION

By John Duke Anthony

This past week's tragic incident in California in which yet another student at an American school killed his classmates was as senseless as all the similar acts that went before. It is no less tragic for the likelihood that, short of effective remedies, the phenomenon is destined to recur in the future.

As with the earlier school killings, there will be much wringing of hands and soul searching among pundits and politicians in search of ways to cope with this ongoing blight on a significant segment of American society. In the debates that will ensue, much can be learned from a hitherto little known effort by the Kuwait-America Foundation that is helping to address this problem and others related to the violence that persists in the lives of Americans and Kuwaitis.

Two weeks ago, the nonprofit and nongovernmental Kuwait-America Foundation (KAF) administered a multifaceted program to commemorate both the fortieth anniversary of Kuwait's independence and the tenth year since its liberation from Iraqi aggression. Over a period of several days, KAF manifested a growing phenomenon in international relations: the efficacy of having such organizations play pivotal roles in matters of global importance.

Like innumerable other Arab and Islamic philanthropic associations, KAF has yet to

become a household word in America. However, the day is fast approaching when it will be recognized as having become a respected albeit low-key activist in support of laudable objectives in American national life.

Until ten days ago, KAF was not as well known in Kuwait as one might have thought. Many outside observers had believed, mistakenly, that Kuwait's government and private sector must have held annual commemorative events to honor the country's liberation from aggression ten years ago.

A Country's Yellow Ribbon. Not so. The commemorative activities were the first of their kind. The previous national decision to forego any annual outpouring of joy at the return of the country's internationally recognized government, and with it, the restoration of freedom and safety to the Kuwaiti people, was deliberate.

The decision not to celebrate was, in essence, reflective of a people's collective preference instead for wearing a yellow ribbon in memory of hundreds of missing Kuwaiti and other nationals who have yet to return from the months-long nightmare that Iraq unleashed against Kuwait on August 2, 1990.

For most, the idea of rejoicing with so many of their fellow citizens' still in Iraq was seen as

premature and inappropriate. It was overshadowed by the ongoing grief over the country's hostages, its missing in action, and the fate of other nationalities abducted to Baghdad in the waning days of the war that have yet to be accounted for by Iraq.

The Numbness of Numbers. In Kuwait as elsewhere, the process of coming to terms with the impact of an adversary's aggression and violence against it is considered by most to be an essential component of reconciliation. But among outsiders who have wanted to see reconciliation between Kuwait and Iraq occur sooner rather than later are many who appear to wonder whether the concern about those missing from Kuwait has been a Kuwaiti pretense or, at least, exaggerated for effect.

If so, many reason, could it not be little more than a carefully crafted device deliberately tailored to garner international sympathy for the country's ongoing deterrence and defense needs that might not be as effectively obtained in any other way?

By the standard of Great Power populations, the number at issue, cynics seem prone to emphasize, appears to be minuscule. In noting that the total is 608, the tendency of some has been to think that this is a typographical error and that one or more digits must be lacking.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Kuwaiti citizens who vanished from their country in the course of being spirited off to Baghdad by Iraqi forces a decade ago are hardly faceless statistics. No Kuwaiti of this writer's acquaintance knows fewer than four who disappeared without, to date, there being a trace of what happened to them. By extension, most Kuwaitis know and regularly come into contact with an average of forty other Kuwaitis who long for the return of those missing.

Because the population of the United States is so large, and that of Kuwait is so small, it is difficult for many Americans to grasp the extent of the tragedy that befell the Kuwaiti people as a result of the Iraqi invasion and occupation.

The following, however, provides perspective that may be otherwise hard-to-come-by. In terms that U.S. citizens can relate to, the number of Kuwaitis missing in Iraq is equivalent to 270,000 Americans being incarcerated and unaccounted for in undisclosed sites in Canada

or Mexico. In terms that the British and French can understand, it is as if 60,000 of their citizens had been forcibly seized, carted across the border, and, to this day, were still being held in a neighboring country.

On a related additional Richter scale of human tragedy, the recent commemorative events in Kuwait, in which this writer was privileged to participate, revealed yet another daunting set of numbers. One of the highlights was the unveiling by Kuwaitis, former President Bush, and former British Prime Ministers Thatcher and Major, of a memorial to the war dead resulting from the country's liberation. Listed were the names of the 351 Kuwaitis and 331 Allied Coalition country and other nationals killed during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Three hundred fifty one. Some may say, "for an international conflict that dominated the headlines for more than half a year, that's not so many."

Those Killed: American Comparisons. Any in doubt as to "how many is many?" might ask a Kuwaiti. The number, again in terms equivalent to the population of the United States, is equal to *135,000 Americans* having been killed. For further context and comparison, consider that the United States lost 58,000 in Vietnam.

Here, two points are especially pertinent. The first is that the proportionate number of Kuwaitis killed by Iraqis, in comparison with Americans killed in Vietnam, is almost three times as many. The second is that Iraqis killed this many Kuwaitis over a period of just seven months. The 58,000 Americans that died in Vietnam were killed over a 12-year period, *i. e.*, a span of time nearly 24 times as long.

The survivors of the Kuwaitis killed during the conflict, including their spouses, children, and other relatives of those missing and unaccounted for, were front and center stage recently in Kuwait. Former U.S. President George Bush, Sr., U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, former British Prime Ministers Dame Margaret Thatcher and John Major, General Norman Schwarzkopf, and many another prominent international leader associated with the country's liberation met with them. They listened to their pleas for assistance and vowed

not to rest until their countrymen's return or until the missing have been fully accounted for by their captors.

KAF, Violence, and The Do The Write Thing Program. On display by KAF in the same ceremonies was another side of the same coin minted in the currency of violence. These were American grassroots leaders of KAF's "Do The Write Thing (DTWT) Program." The Program exists in a growing number of American cities that have long been plagued by exceptional levels of violence among their inner city youth. A range of civic, religious, and professional leaders from Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. were among the cities represented.

In the aftermath of the reversal of Iraq's aggression, a great many Kuwaitis wanted to convey their gratitude to the United States in a way that would have practical meaning and great symbolic significance to what lay at the heart of a country and a people's violation. To this end, KAF spearheaded a one-of-a-kind movement to ensure that the lives of Americans and others that had fallen in Operations *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm* were not in vain.

Reaching Out to American Schools. KAF has reached out to American school districts where guns and acts of violence remain commonplace, where parents, with abundant reason, worry for the safety of their children, and where students and other children often live literally in fear of their lives.

In so doing, KAF joined forces with national and local humanitarian and nonprofit associations, including the National Urban League, the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, and several other civic and professional organizations. Ever since, KAF has been working with leaders in America's urban centers in a way that, thus far, is unparalleled among non-governmental and nonprofit groups in other countries.

Of direct relevance to what transpired in a California school last week, KAF has targeted a core constituency within which the incidence of acts of violence per capita in the United States remains all too frequent: intermediate and secondary school students. Working with school

superintendents, principals, guidance counselors, and teachers, KAF several years ago initiated a bold and innovative program that has met with increasingly widespread appeal among American leaders concerned with curbing the incidence of crimes against youth. The program has inspired thousands of American students to write essays about the effect of violence on their lives and what they propose to do to bring about its end in their community.

Paneled judges read the essays and select the finalists. The winners, together with their parents or teacher, get to visit Washington, D.C. There they are recognized in an awards ceremony attended by national dignitaries, meet their Congressional representatives and officials at the Department of Justice and the Office of Education, and tour the cultural and civic highlights of the nation's capital.

In arriving to this way of contributing something of meaning and lasting value to the United States, the citizens of Kuwait, through KAF, have unlocked a powerful positive force for good. The beneficiaries are numerous American metropolitan areas previously in a quandary as to how best to begin to loosen the grip of violence upon their communities.

KAF, in essence, has provided hope for countless American youth who had all but given up hope that there was a reason to believe that they could make it to adulthood unscathed by the infliction of physical pain upon them or a loved one by someone in their community. It provides them a ticket to non-violence.

A Recipe for Responsible Citizenship. Participation in KAF's Do the Write Thing Program offers American students a sure-fire recipe for instilling a significant measure of personal responsibility, accountability, leadership skills, and the means to responsible citizenship. And it does all this in association with the students' parents, teachers, schools, and a plethora of civic and professional associations within their communities.

A student's right of entry to the DTWT Program is completion of a three-part essay. Students write about how violence has affected their lives. They suggest ways for ending this scourge upon the quality of life in many of America's inner cities. They express their resolve to do what they can to make a difference

by having nothing to do with this phenomenon that, left unchecked, will continue to rob their community and country of a promising component of its future leaders.

Sound schmaltzy? Not to the survivors of thousands of those gunned down in the prime of their life, like those in California, Colorado, Georgia, and elsewhere. Not to those who had previously despaired of having a reason to believe that they could make it through school without their or someone dear to them being killed or falling victim to bodily harm en route.

Not to the unsung heroes and heroines among teachers who struggle daily and valiantly, often against seemingly insurmountable odds, to try to instill a sense of self-worth, values, and the pursuit of excellence among America's leaders of tomorrow.

Not to school guidance counselors, leaders of youth associations, crime prevention and law enforcement officers, and civic as well as business, professional, and religious leaders committed to offering youth a range of opportunities for self-development no matter how disadvantaged their personal, home, and community situations might be.

Not to former Kuwaiti Ambassadors to the United States Shaikh Saud Nasser Al-Sabah and Dr. Muhammad Salim Al-Sabah. Not to KAF Chairman Dr. Hassan Al-Ebraheem, KAF Vice-Chairman Anwar Nouri, and not to KAF co-founding board members Fawzi Al-Sultan and Daniel Callister. Not to Kuwait University President Dr. Faizah Al-Kharafi, Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science Director General Dr. Ali Al-Shamlan, and the Kuwaiti members of KAF's board of directors.

Not to Administration and Congressional leaders who endorse President Bush's encouragement and empowerment of private sector initiatives that seek to reverse the emasculating effects of school and urban violence on our country's would-be future leaders.

Practical Idealism. What KAF has done is help bring into being in an important corner of American national life the essence of practical idealism. It has done so through joining hands with the National Campaign to Stop Violence, the National Guard, the regional and local offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation,

the Council of Great City Schools, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, and the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. Each of these organizations supports KAF's Do The Write Thing Program.

KAF's programs and activities also receive support from nearly a dozen Kuwaiti companies and leading American multinational corporations. In addition to the Marriott Corporation, the list of U.S. firms that support KAF's Do The Write Thing Program is impressive and growing. They include U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee members Boeing Corporation, Booz Allen Hamilton, Bryan Cave, Ltd., Chevron Corporation, CMS Energy, ExxonMobil, General Dynamics, General Electric Corporation, Lockheed Martin, Lucent Technologies, McDonnell Douglas, Merrill Lynch, MPRI, Northrop Grumman, Parsons Corporation, Philip Morris Companies, Inc., Raytheon, SAIC, Texaco, and TRW.

KAF Student, Teacher, and Parent Award Ceremonies. Anyone searching for an injection of idealism would do well to attend one of the DTWT awards ceremonies. Present at each is an assemblage of national dignitaries and, in the wings, a significant number of journalists, television producers, and film crews.

The opportunity to observe the press in such a setting is illuminative of the powerful impact that this program has on young and old alike. In few other settings are media professionals so predictably moved to tears as they are by the impact that the Do The Write Thing Program has on American youth, their teachers, and their parents.

Each year during the filming of the annual awards ceremony, this writer has seen cameramen involuntarily reach for their handkerchiefs. They become caught up in their emotions from seeing, at the end of their lens, a mirror image of someone who could easily be their daughter or son.

This is what invariably happens when one sees and hears the students read their prize-winning essays to appreciative adult audiences

in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol and elsewhere.

The stirring and uplifting scene happened again ten days ago in Kuwait instead of Washington. An added feature to the ceremonies commemorating the anniversary of the country's liberation was a recent KAF-commissioned film about the DTWT Program. The film premiered at the Kuwait-based Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development, the Arab world's leading intra-regional development assistance agency. The audience was virtually a "Who's Who" of all the national and international leaders that had been involved in lifting the veil of violence from Kuwait ten years ago.

The film's main actors were an unlikely collection of celebrities: former President Bush, former Secretary of State James Baker, former Secretary of Defense and now Vice-President Dick Cheney, current Secretary of State Powell, and General Norman Schwarzkopf. Each testified to the efficacy of the Do The Write Thing Program as a major contribution to the national challenge of ending the continuing pattern of violence in the lives of America's inner city students and children.

A Symphony and Two American Teenagers. One of the many highlights of the several days' festivities in which this writer was a participant was a specially-produced symphony by a Kuwaiti artist that included strands of "America the Beautiful." The symphony was performed by an ensemble of Kuwaiti musicians.

At the end of the concert, young Rominna Vellasenor, a 13-year-old student from an inner city school in Chicago, took the stage to read her essay. One could barely see her head behind the podium as she hurled thunderbolts of insight about the phenomenon of violence in America. She was followed by John Bonham, now in university but earlier a student and resident of a crime-plagued neighborhood in Washington, D.C.

Rominna, one of this past year's Do The Write Thing Program winners, was there with her mother. John was a prize-winner several years ago. Rominna's essay was cast in the immediacy of the here-and-now of a life that has been seldom far from crime in her school and community. John's was forged from the

perspective of the rear view mirror, contrasting the downwardly spiraling life he had led before he participated in the program and the one hundred and eighty degree turn-around for the better that it has taken since then. Following their speeches and the film, there was not a dry eye in the audience, the President's included.

KAF's Further Preparation of America's Leaders of Tomorrow. Only days before the anniversary celebrations began, a group of American university and high school students had visited Kuwait as participants in the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' Kuwait Studies Program. What all had in common was their outstanding participation as delegates to one of the National Council's annual Model Arab League Leadership Development Programs, which are currently underway and involve 2,000 students and their teachers in Models in 18 cities across the United States.

For years now, KAF, the University of Kuwait, the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science, and the American Embassy in Kuwait, headed by former Ambassadors Edward Gnehm and Ryan Crocker, and by current Ambassador James Larocco, have hosted the Kuwait Studies Program for promising American youth that have performed with distinction in the Model Arab Leagues.

Considering that all of the participants to date are still in their twenties, the results, to date, are phenomenal. One of the program's alumni is currently assigned to a major U.S. government post that deals daily with pressing issues pertaining to the Kuwait-U.S. bilateral relationship. Another entered the Foreign Service and was posted to the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait. Another is a career military officer working full time on strategic U.S. defense planning relating to Kuwait and other GCC countries.

Yet another alumnus of the program is currently a Rhodes Scholar. Others include the winner of First Prize for Best Master's Thesis on the Middle East at Oxford University last year, a former intern at the National Council and KAF who is finishing her Ph.D. at Stanford, and one of the best of a new breed of American foreign affairs specialists who is currently teaching

tomorrow's military leaders and defense strategists at one of America's service academies.

More than half a dozen of the Kuwait Studies Program and Model Arab League alumni have returned to Kuwait for a year of intensive Arabic language training at Kuwait University. Others are working in the United States for member companies of the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee that have invested in Kuwait's economy. Each of these young American leaders of tomorrow has been exposed at length to a side of Kuwaiti culture and society quite different from any they could have imagined short of visiting the country and meeting with its people.

KAF As A Bridge To The Future. In this way, KAF is helping to prepare a cadre of Americans that will manage the future bilateral Kuwait-United States relationship and America's ties to other Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

This group of American youth that KAF has assisted is only a few years older than those mowed down by gunfire in the California school. Each acknowledges their debt to KAF and recognizes it as an organization that helped them, much earlier than most of their peers, to take responsibility for their actions and to do what they can to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others.

For any nation in search of a cure for the phenomenon of violence and other behavioral excesses that plague its society, it is incumbent upon its leaders to look first and foremost to their country's own resources for solutions. This, to be sure, has been and will continue to be done by America's national, state, and local leaders. But here is a sterling example of how one can also learn much that is timely and relevant from the private sector and civic activist efforts of a dedicated group of Kuwaitis.

These Arab allies, though geographically remote, are no less profoundly concerned than Americans are with finding the means to come to grips with the vicious cycle of violence visited upon their country and people. They are committed to doing something positive and lasting about it, both here and in Kuwait, in the course of working side by side with their counterparts in the United States.

The efforts of the Kuwait-America Foundation to help American youth expand their horizons and break the barriers of violence have emerged from the horrors of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the deepening bonds of U.S.-Kuwaiti friendship spurred by Kuwait's liberation ten years ago. The spirit of understanding and reciprocal respect that these efforts represent are a testimonial to the wisdom, necessity, and mutuality of benefit that flow from closer U.S.-Arab relations.

Dr. John Duke Anthony is Publisher of *GulfWire*; President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; and Secretary, U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. All three are Washington, D.C.-based nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations dedicated to educating Americans about the Arab countries, the Middle East and the Islamic