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SPECIAL ISSUE:

AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE DILEMMAS OF MULTILINGUALISM

REPLY TO 'AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AT WORK' (I)

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I am grateful to Gönül Pultar for taking CASAR's first international conference seriously and for providing her 'candid impressions' in the first issue of *RIAS*. Comparing her report to my own in the March 2006 *ASA Newsletter* reveals just how divergent experiences and interpretations of the same event can be. It reminds me of the tale of the six blind men who compare the same elephant to a tree, a rope, a snake, a spear, a fan, and a wall. Indeed, my report concluded that 'the most salient feature of the conference was lack of agreement' (McGreevy: 15). Yet it is the voices of those with whom we disagree that are most likely to challenge us to re-evaluate our own values, commitments and assumptions. We need each other to even begin see the whole elephant. The feint hope I still feel in Lebanon after the war, is the same I felt at the conclusion of the conference: that we can continue to talk across what many assume are profound fault lines. It may sometimes seem that such conversations take place on a delicate platform suspended above an abyss, but the abyss is in our own vision and of our own making. Why should we even look down?

Pultar's impression is that the conference was 'more than anything else, a subtle American diplomatic endeavor' (Pultar: 41). I understand the pervasiveness of US power; it was one of the foci of the conference, but if the conference was an 'American diplomatic endeavor', who was doing the endeavoring if not the organizers? If diplomacy was the effect, rather than the intention, the conference must indeed be the outstanding exception among the failures of US public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East (*Hi* magazine, Radio Sawa, Al-Hurrah TV, and Karen Hughes's visits). If public diplomacy is supposed to make people love the US, the conference had no diplomatic effect, as Pultar's reaction indicates. When the US State Department sponsors academic activities in the Middle East, it may welcome debate and even criticism of US policies because these subtly display values it wants to label 'American'. But when an independent academic center actively seeks out diverse voices, creates a space for dissensus—and spends its resources to support regional scholars who, in Pultar's words, 'do not usually have the financial means to attend American studies conferences in the West' (42)—to label that 'American' is to accept that fostering academic discourse is a unique attribute of the culture and political system of the United States. The conference, she argues, was 'in the end, a very American affair: smoothly run, it could have taken place on US soil, with all the patrician amenities thereof' (44). What

does this assertion imply about how non-Americans would run a conference? Finally Pultar suggests that CASAR should 'on principle, be operated by non-Americans' (42). This is a curious notion. Why does citizenship carry so much meaning? And who is an American? People with US citizenship do not have some privileged position to speak synecdochically for their fellow citizens, let alone America or the Americas, but would eliminating their voices somehow purify the project? The committee that organized the conference—which was composed of two Lebanese and three US citizens—wanted to create a space in which people from different parts of the world could gather to make 'America' an object of scrutiny while recognizing that America was already in the Middle East and the Middle East was already in America.

Finally, I want to thank Dr. Pultar. She wrote several generous things about me. Moreover, she has opened another space for dialogue. We intended the conference to do the same thing.

WORKS CITED:

— McGreevy, P. (2006) 'America in the Middle East/The Middle East in America: Conference Report', *American Studies Association Newsletter* 29(1) : 1,15. Also available at http://staff.aub.edu.lb/~webcasar/Conference/Conferencereport.html.

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