

# Clovisizing America

By James G. Abourezk

Most Arab Americans know Dr. Clovis Maksoud as a sought-after banquet speaker, someone who is able to talk at great length, on virtually any subject, without notes or a script. He currently teaches at the American University in Washington, DC where he heads the Center for the Global South. For many years he served as the Arab League ambassador to India, as well as to the United Nations, in New York, and



Ambassador Clovis Maksoud.

to the United States, in Washington, DC.

What most people do not know is how Clovis attained his talent for oratory and debate.

As a student at Oxford University, Clovis learned the art of pure debate by speaking at the well-known Oxford Union. As he spoke during one debate, using extremely long sentences to make his point, someone in the audience eventually shouted, "Full Stop." The person's point being made in that manner caused the audience to applaud. But it did not stop Clovis.

"Sir," Clovis shouted, "you did not take into account all of the commas I used during my speech."

His retort brought another round of applause and laughter, converting that particular near-disaster into a triumph.

In 1983, after Egypt had been suspended by the Arab League because Pres-

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ident Anwar Sadat had signed a treaty with Israel, Yasser Arafat decided to travel from Tripoli, Lebanon to Cairo. At a press conference Clovis was holding at the U.N., Jihad Al Khazen, the correspondent for the Saudi newspaper *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, asked him, "Do you think that Arafat's trip to Cairo constituted a violation of the Arab League resolutions suspending Egypt?"

"I do not think it constitutes a violation of the Arab League's resolution," Clovis replied, "but at the same time, neither does it constitute compliance."

It was from this answer that Jihad Al Khazen created the word, "Clovisizing"—which, he explained, was the opposite of philosophizing. "Philosophizing tries to make the Unknown, Known," Al Khazen said. On the other hand, he added, "Clovisizing is designed to render the Known, Unknown."

During his student years at Oxford, Clovis spent a great deal of time at London's Hyde Park Corner honing his speaking and debating skills, with the help of the usual crowd of hecklers in the audience.

Hyde Park Corner was, and is, a place where people gather for just that purpose—to heckle whomever is attempting to get his or her point across by speaking before this cynical audience. It also helped him develop a vocabulary in English that would make a Ph.D. in English envious, using words that to this day have some in his audience immediately rushing for a dictionary.

Clovis early on was a strong supporter of Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser, and had gone so far as to have authored a book about the famous Arab leader. He eventually was appointed Arab League ambassador, posted first to the country of India. It was during that posting that he began making history—well, at least the history of Clovis Maksoud.

During his term as ambassador, he was asked to speak to the British House of Commons on his favorite subject—the Arab World. Aware that there was a Jewish member of Commons in his audience, Clovis pointed his forefinger in the air and began with: "The struggle in the Middle East is a struggle between transcendental imperial Zionism and the progressive movement of pan-Arab nationalism...."

Just at that point, he was abruptly interrupted by the Jewish MP, who rose and said, "Sir, would you kindly speak in Eng-

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lish, I'm having great difficulty understanding you."

While he was posted in New Delhi, Clovis had occasion to return to Lebanon. The mode of flight was to be a propeller plane, in the days before jets were common. The Iraqi ambassador to India, having learned that Clovis' plane was to stop in Baghdad for refueling, told Clovis he would be delighted to arrange for a banquet in his honor there, and that he would be asked to make a speech. Naturally, Clovis agreed.

When the overnight flight from Delhi landed in Baghdad in the morning, Clovis emerged from the plane, noticing two military officers who were asking passengers, "Which of you is Clovis Maksoud?"

"It's me," Clovis said, feeling somewhat honored that he was to have an escort to his hotel.

"You are under arrest," one of the officers announced.

What Clovis did not know was that Abdul Karim Al Qasem had, overnight, conducted a successful coup against the Iraqi government, and Clovis had unwittingly landed in a country being run by Al Qasem, Nasser's rival for leadership in the Arab world.

The two officers, who had a taxicab waiting, jammed Clovis between them in the back seat, and took him directly to Al Qasem's office, where he was roughly ushered into the new president's office and ordered to sit down in front of the presidential desk.

Glaring at him, Al Qasem said, "So, you believe that Gamal Abdul Nasser is the Arab world's greatest leader?"

Immediately sizing up the situation with survival paramount in his mind, Clovis said, "Not necessarily."

"I'm going to show you something about leadership," Qasem responded, taking Clovis with him to listen to a speech he was to deliver before a group of Iraqis at a housing project. Qasem forced him to listen to the speech, then ordered him taken to the hotel and put under house arrest. Two guards were posted outside the door of his hotel room.

Clovis sat in his room, wondering what was to be in store for him. When evening came, he heard a knock on the door, interrupting his thoughts of impending doom. He opened the door and saw someone he knew as an old friend, a member of the new revolutionary cabinet.

"Let's go," the minister said.

"Where?" Clovis asked.

"To the dinner in your honor," the minister said.

"But," Clovis asked, pleadingly, "what about the guards?"

"Don't worry about the guards," his friend said, "they're taken care of."

He delivered Clovis to the location of the banquet in his honor. Clovis gave a rousing, well-received speech, and was returned to the hotel and to the two guards, who were still waiting for him outside his room.

The next morning the two military officers presented themselves at his hotel room, took him downstairs, put him in the same taxicab, again jamming him in between them, for the ride back to the airport.

Before putting him on the plane to Beirut, the two officers ordered Clovis to pay for the taxi, including the waiting time for the full 24 hours, as well as the round trip to and from the hotel, and delivered their parting words: "Don't try to come back again."

Clovis has received many honors similar to the one in Baghdad, but one of his most memorable was the one delivered by the master of ceremonies at a large rally in India's Punjab province. As the Arab League ambassador to India, Clovis was to be the main speaker. He was introduced in English by a Punjabi with the accent peculiar to that region of India.

"Dr. Maksoud is a well-educated gentleman," the Punjabi began, "who has a doctoral degree in political science and a degree in law. He is, therefore, a deep thinker, a highly respected diplomat and a liar by profession."

It was after the 1973 Middle East war that he was sought out by journalist Edward Sheehan, who asked him to comment on the outcome of the war.

"In every dimension," Clovis began, "metaphysically, psychologically, and transcendently, the 1973 war was one of our most magnificent political victories... within the context of our military defeat."

Among the examples of oratorical gymnastics performed by Clovis, his most recent one involved a discussion he had in Arabic with a member of one of his audiences. Clovis had recommended in his speech that both factions of the Palestinian leadership deserved a sort of "civil disobedience" by the Palestinian people to require both to unite against the Zionists.

His critic said it was not fair to equate the Palestinian Authority with the Hamas leadership in Gaza. Clovis told him, "I agree with the essence of your question, but I agree much more with the substance of my answer."

Perhaps his crowning achievement in the world of Clovisizing was when he hosted the secretary-general of the Arab League, Chezli Klibi, who had come to the U.N. for the first time. Because he was French-educated, Klibi asked Clovis to arrange for them to go to a theater in New York to watch an American play, implying that French theatre was superior to American theatre. Because of his extremely weak eyesight, Clovis asked his secretary to make certain to book two seats in the first five rows. She reported that the closest she could get seats was in the 16th row. Knowing that it was the only night the secretary-general would be able to go to the theater, he told her to go ahead and book them.

Klibi spoke only Arabic and French, no English. As the play started, Clovis leaned over and told Klibi, "You tell me what we're seeing, and I'll tell you what we're hearing."

As a great and memorable character of the Arab world, Dr. Maksoud is now in his 81st year, still traveling—and has yet to turn down a speaking invitation. □

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