

From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

Washington

Days of Rage

US media cowardice

AS I outlined in a previous column (SG, August 9) what will happen on American public television on September 6 is a testament to the efficacy of American Jewish pressure group politics and general media cowardice in this country.

The long-delayed and twice-cancelled *Days of Rage: The Young Palestinians* documentary about the Palestinian Intifada will finally be shown. But by the time that happens the Public Broadcasting System, PBS, will have spent about the same \$180,000 it took to make the documentary packaging the 90-minute film within a Zionist "wrap-around."

This "wrap-around" is quite unique. Not only is PBS following the documentary with a heavily-biased panel obviously designed to water-down the documentary's impact and tell Americans what they should be thinking — rather than just let them think for themselves.

In addition, PBS will also "prepare" the viewers by telling them that this particular documentary has a "point of view" (as if most don't) and letting the Israeli establishment have its own say about the Intifada in an opening 15 minutes also designed to tell viewers what they should be thinking.

The story I've been able to piece together of how the Panel was selected is the epitome of how successful pressure can be brought by pro-Israeli groups.

These fiercely competing yet loosely co-ordinated groups — a few dozen in total — had already managed to get *Days of Rage* cancelled at least twice before using a combination of arguments about the films' biases with threats of membership cancellations and funds withholding. Most recently it was scheduled to be shown on June 5 and a press release had already been issued by PBS.

But that was before the storm of protests — letters, phone calls and behind-the-scenes efforts to both discredit the documentary itself and its director-producer Jo Franklin-Trout. Plus the not-so-subtle threats, of course. After all, there are 1.7 million Jews in the New York City area alone; and they are among the largest givers to, and watchers of, public television.

Just two weeks before the scheduled June showing, the vice-president of WNYC, the PBS "presenting station" at that time cancelled it in her own rage.

"It's one-sided," Chloe Aaron asserted noting that her station was withdrawing completely from having anything to do with *Days of Rage*. "It makes no mention of how the Jews got to Israel, no mention of the holocaust, no mention of how the Palestinians treated the Jews nor how the Arabs treated the Palestinians. It's a pure propaganda piece that I'd compare to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, Aaron concluded making reference to a well-known Nazi propaganda film.

In response, columnists in major newspapers — including Anthony Lewis in the *New York Times* and Howard Rosenberg in the *Los Angeles Times* (both Jewish by the way and both thoughtful critics of what has happened with *Days of Rage*) — came forward to challenge PBS for its handling of this matter.

But that was before the "wrap-

around" device that was finally adopted, before the American Jewish Congress issued a slanderous 8-page "analysis" attacking both the documentary and its maker, and before the decision by PBS to ameliorate Israel's supporters by taking steps to purchase a multi-hour Israeli-government sponsored documentary that will probably be shown later this year.

The idea for the wrap-around seems to have originated with persons working with Jewish organisations whose very jobs entail bringing pressures on the media on behalf of Israel. Foremost among them was the American Jewish Committee — the AJC, the same organisation that publishes the neo-Conservative *Commentary* magazine.

AJC's Director of Israel and Middle East Affairs, George Gruen, circulated a multi-page "analysis" claiming that Jo Franklin-Trout's production "masquerades as a documentary," but "in fact, it is essentially a 90-minute political commercial."

"In summary," Gruen concluded, "the basic problem of the Franklin-Trout documentary is that it is not really a documentary at all. Its use of selective quotes, carefully chosen images that stress Israeli guilt and Palestinian innocence, and its distortion of fact, make *Days of Rage* not simply advocacy journalism but dishonest advocacy journalism."

And so the panel evolved out of this caldron of pressures and attacks with PBS clearly afraid of the consequences of continuing to offend the Jewish organisations.

In this context the astonishment one would otherwise have that the new presenting station, WNET in New York, was even pressured out of inviting a single Palestinian American to be on the Panel about the Intifada becomes explicable. At one point they did invite Professor Edward Said, PNC member and Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University — one of the most forceful, articulate, and presentable Palestinian spokesmen. But then under threats of boycott from Jewish groups and insistence that if Said appeared then an important Israeli personality had to be invited, PBS quietly cancelled that invitation.

Actually the process was a bit more subtle, they simply never called Said back again after the initial "inquiry" about his availability. Said only found out he wasn't being invited after all when he had his office call WNET and ask them what was going on.

Continually badgering PBS about how bad the film was and that American Jews had to be loudly heard in rebuttal, the Jewish groups decided that on the Panel should be their primary spokesman, the current president of the Presidents Conference of Major American Jewish Organisations, Seymour Reich.

But they didn't stop there. At the last moment they also added a more Labour Party oriented American Jew who had gone to live in Israel for a few years but recently returned to the US as correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post* and a group of American Jewish weeklies — Walter Ruby.

When questioned about the make-up of the Panel, Ruby told me in a phone

interview that as far as he was concerned the Panel's make-up was fine and he hadn't thought about whether or not there should specifically have been a Palestinian. Even more interestingly, when George Gruen was asked his feelings about the Panel and the whole "wrap-around" procedure he indicated his delight.

Shortly after the Panel discussion was taped in late July, Ruby then wrote a negative article about *Days of Rage* charging that "it is, as its critics have charged, a badly flawed film, whose producer-director has employed heavy-handed cinematic technique to slam home her message of advocacy for the Palestinian cause." So much for Ruby's own biases; and for PBS's claim that he is the "moderate" Jewish voice.

The other Panel members chosen by PBS are two former Reagan administration apologists for American policies (as well as for Israel) — Donald Keys, an extremely pro-Israeli black Republican; and Richard Murphy, former Assistant Secretary of State who can be described as the quintessential "Good German" in the sense that he simply did his job over the past decade, though of course he

GAZETTE correspondent Mark Bruzonsky was temporarily detained by Israeli security on Sunday as he was about to board a plane for the US.

Bruzonsky, a US citizen and chairman of the Jewish Committee on the Mid-east was requested by the airport security authorities to provide a list of Palestinians he met during his three-week visit to the occupied Jerusalem.

himself, so he whispers now and then, had different views.

Lastly, in search of an Arab-American who was acceptable to the Jewish organisations yet sufficient so that PBS could at least claim they made some attempt at "balance," PBS got Jim Zogby, founder of the Arab-American Institute (AAI) to appear.

Zogby, a Lebanese American well-known for his self-promotion and for playing all sides of the political fence in Washington, was last mentioned in this column back in February when he helped to sabotage the ADC invitation to Chairman Arafat to speak at their annual conference.

When questioned why he allowed himself to be used in this way as the "kosher" Arab-American, why he didn't question the composition of the Panel and insist PBS invite at least one Palestinian American, Zogby has a variety of excuses. Most of all he says he was "misled" about the composition of the Panel; that he wasn't aware until the morning of the taping of the Panel's final composition.

Asked why he didn't object when he found out, and if indeed he was misled refuse to participate on the spot — a move that would have forced PBS to reconsider and to reschedule the Panel — Zogby simply says he thought it better not to and further notes that he did speak with Said whom he says encouraged him to appear. But those in the know here in Washington are pretty sure that Zogby jumped at the oppor-

tunity to promote himself and his own organisation, aware of what was happening but willing to go along in order to push himself into the limelight despite the political costs and symbolism.

The irony of this whole matter of the Panel, of course, is that by way of response to criticism that the documentary is unbalanced PBS has itself put together a Panel subject to the very same criticism. But this time the criticism is coming from Israel's detractors and critics — and these groups have no where near the clout as do Israel's friends.

But worst of all is that the PBS capitulation takes place not only on September 6th. It's a general cave-in to Jewish pressure and money; one that people in the USA have grown used to. But many of us had hoped — wrongly it now seems — that the overall situation was beginning to change with the impact of the Intifada and the PLO's peace offensive.

The cave-in extends into future months as well. The rumour is that as a further concession to the Jewish groups PBS is now close to purchasing a multi-hour "made in Israel" TV tear-jerker about the birth of Israel that is far more propagandistic than anything Jo Franklin-Trout ever imagined.

"Unconfirmed reports," wrote film critic Howard Rosenberg in the *Los Angeles Times* a few weeks ago, are that in a difficult meeting with PBS officials from around the country an agreement was "hammered out" that PBS will show up to ten hours of pro-Israeli programme to match *Days of Rage*.

PBS officials vehemently deny such a deal, yet it has been learned that a seven-hour version of *Pillar of Fire* — a documentary tracing events leading to Israel's 1948 declaration of nationhood — may be purchased for over half a million dollars from the American distributor of this Israeli Broadcasting Authority white-wash of Israel's birth.

PBS acknowledges it is considering *Pillars of Fire* but denies it is doing so as a counter to *Days of Rage*. It has been learned, however, the PBS is working with the Israeli embassy in Washington trying to come up with arguments that the Israeli Broadcasting Authority really isn't under the control of the Israeli government but more like the BBC in England. It's a tough case to present as anyone who knows the reality of the IBA must realise.

But even if IBA actually were independent of the Israeli government, Howard Rosenberg asked the right question in his own commentary a few weeks ago in the *L.A. Times*: "The larger question is whether PBS should buy a programme from any nation on a sensitive topic in which that nation has a vested interest. Would it buy a programme from the BBC on, say, Northern Ireland?"

Nevertheless, don't be surprised to hear later in the year that *Pillars of Fire* is on the way. And if so this seven hours will be added to four hours already scheduled when Abba Eban hosts a multi-part series on the history of Israel in coming months.

"I'll be real curious to see if they feel the need to put on a panel discussion after that," says Franklin-Trout.