

Peace to Beirut with All My Heart

A year's exploration in a reborn city had scarcely begun when Lebanon's fragile peace crumbled. BY RYAN FARHA, CLASS OF 2008

AROUND 11 O'CLOCK on the morning of July 17, 2006, I received a call on my Lebanese mobile phone from a number I didn't recognize.

"Is this Ryan Farha?" asked the voice on the other end of the line, an American woman.

"Yes."

"The U.S. embassy is evacuating a small group of American civilians today. Can you be ready by 3 p.m.?"

"Yes," I answered, calm yet clearly excited. After the woman instructed me not to tell any of my fellow students about the evacuation plot, the conversation ended abruptly, with few details about the actual evacuation procedure itself. Regardless, I wasn't concerned. I scurried up to my dorm room to pack the one bag I was allowed to take with me. Clothes, books, and



DANIEL DUBOIS

souvenirs I had purchased in Lebanon had to stay behind. Hunched over from the weight of my stuffed backpack, I left my room and ventured out to find a restaurant where I could enjoy one last chicken *shawarma*.

That night I was one of 34 Americans headed for the island of Cyprus on board a Greek cruise ship chartered by the French. My plans to spend a year studying in Lebanon had come to a crashing halt, just as Israel began to intensify its devastating offensive on Lebanon and her people.

I had arrived in Beirut on June 26, eagerly anticipating the year I was to spend studying at the American University of Beirut. I was enrolled in an intensive Arabic language program for the summer, to be followed by a year of liberal arts courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

I was not a complete stranger to the city. My father, a doctor who fled Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of 1982, had brought me and my family there several times before. Nevertheless, I was excited to finally explore the country on my own.

Beirut went above and beyond my expectations. The Arabic language program was truly intensive. We spent most of the day in class, received several hours' worth of homework, and our teachers spoke to us almost exclusively in Arabic. Still, my evenings were free to explore the charm and craziness of the city's rebirth following the years of war it had seen. I wandered through marketplaces, past cafés and courtyards, and visited countless restaurants and street vendors, devouring chicken *shawarma*, *baba ghanoush*, *falafel* and other Lebanese delicacies.

Although it is nestled on the tranquil Mediterranean Sea, Beirut pulsates with energy at night. My classmates and I frequented the city's hotspots, visiting nightclubs with names like Crystal, Taboo and

Starlet. Beirut's charms kept us constantly busy; I can hardly recall an idle moment.

What struck me most about the city were its remarkable, continual contrasts. The road from the airport passes through grimy shantytowns, congested urban areas, and finally reaches the pristine downtown district, built with the dollars of wealthy Gulf Arabs and other investors. Walking down the street, one could pass gorgeous, scantily clad Lebanese women locking arms with their completely veiled friends and family members. The city is a fragile compromise between tolerant Western liberalism and the conservative, religious and family-oriented society of the Middle East.

Because of my admiration for and attachment to the city, my first impulse was to mourn for Beirut's seemingly unavoidable fate when I heard the Israeli bombs dropping. It was as if Israel were not attacking Lebanon itself, but unraveling the 15-plus years of peace and progress that had grown since fighting ceased in the 1980s. Lebanon had flourished into a safe and attractive vacation hotspot during the past 20 years, and just as it geared up for its most bustling and profitable summer in years, violence penetrated its borders, infecting Beirut's still-fragile, carefree atmosphere.

While the Israeli armed forces gained steam, both students and faculty at the American University avoided discussions about the conflict and its politics. When "the situation," as our instructors referred to it, broke out, classes continued with little more than a two-

minute briefing on how Lebanon had seen far more appalling catastrophes, and that these kinds of "events" were "normal" in the country. Several days later, as bombs fell closer and closer to the university, classes were finally canceled, though even then, some fearless instructors held impromptu Arabic sessions.

Violence is nothing new to Lebanon. The country has suffered through decades of conflict and warfare with Israel and other Middle Eastern powers, and the Lebanese have adapted to the persistence of aggression that plagues their country. During the five days of the conflict I experienced, I learned a great deal about the Lebanese people and how they survived decades of war. They would do anything possible to downplay the threat, or find ways to forget about the impending danger. As bombs fell right and left, life in Beirut continued. Even I fell into their tradition of willed disregard for the brewing violence, continuing my life as normal. Once classes were canceled, my friends

and I, instead of sitting in our dorm rooms and waiting, played soccer, ate whatever food we could get our hands on, partied all night on our dorm's balcony, and searched for places to go out near the university.

One night a few of us were walking toward a nearby café called Prague when we clearly heard at least four shells fired, most likely from the Israeli ships off the coast. We paused and looked at each other silently, wondering if we should return to campus, but without a word we continued walking once the loud explosions ceased. This experience was representative of our time in Beirut during the war, which was dominated by long periods of what my friend Daniel called "painful tranquility," interspersed with moments of distant explosions and screaming Israeli jets flying over. In fact, we came to find the "kabooms," as we innocently labeled them, relieving in a sense, for they provided a strange sort of respite from the uneasy restraint of silence.

The following day was perhaps the clos-

est we ever came to being under fire. I was in my bathroom brushing my teeth when I heard jets roar overhead as our building shook. Instantly, everyone in the dorm ran out to see what was happening. A leaflet canister that failed to explode in the air had ripped a large hole in the soccer field next to



NATALIE COX WHEAT

our dorm, where we had been playing the previous afternoon. We hurried down to the field. Scattered everywhere were leaflets that proclaimed in Arabic, "The resistance protects the country? ... The country is a victim of the resistance!" The leaflets had little effect in convincing the students that Hizbullah was the enemy; most of them simply mocked the poorly drawn cartoon, which ironically showed Lebanese citizens dodging Israeli bombs.

The next day the Israelis attempted another leaflet drop at the university. The canister burst this time, but the leaflets all fluttered into the Mediterranean. It was fairly symbolic, I believe, of the failed propaganda campaign waged by the Israelis. In the first leaflet drop, the canister did not work properly. In the second leaflet drop, the canister worked but missed its target. Either way, the Lebanese were not going to accept Israeli propaganda as long as their bombs continued to pound the country.

The streets of Beirut had become eerily

silent several days into the conflict, after the Lebanese mostly fled to the mountains. Most of the American students in the city, forced to wait for their government while it stumpled over evacuation plans, stayed near the university campus. On one of my last days in Beirut, I ventured out to a hole-in-the-wall crêpe store to get some food. The gruff shopkeeper nonchalantly asked me a question that has stuck in my head: "Are you going to stay for the war?"

"Do you think this will be a war?" I responded.

He gave me an incredulous look, as if there were no other option but war. While I was still hanging on to the hope that the situation would calm down and I could resume my studies in Beirut, the Lebanese seemed to believe that war was inevitable—my family included. The day after the Israelis first bombed the airport, my father called me and told me he thought the situation would quickly escalate. He had already planned

to fly to Damascus and whisk me away from the danger.

Despite their pessimism about the coming days, life continued for the Lebanese. The day before I was evacuated, some of my relatives picked me up and drove me across Beirut (parts of which were being bombed) to their apartment to have a pleasant lunch. Their apartment afforded a wonderful view of the southern suburbs, the primary target for the Israeli bombs. Between courses of *fat-toush*, grape leaves and *kibbe*, remarkably loud bursts went off periodically as puffs of smoke rose in the distance, in plain view through the balcony doors.

Following the meal, my great-aunt drove me back to my dorm, and while it was strange in itself to be driving through a city under attack, what amazed me most was the fact that she insisted we stop on the way to buy a box of pastries. When I bashfully insisted that it was not necessary, and hunger was not the

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Sloop's colleagues at Vanderbilt are also among his fans. During the busy presidential primary season in the spring of 2004, Sloop team-taught a course with English professor and author Cecelia Tichi and Bruce Barry, professor of management at the Vanderbilt Owen School and a professor in the sociology department, where he teaches a course on technology, media and culture.

"He is an astute critic of media and popular culture," says Barry, "one who brings rigorous intellectual force to bear, but also seems able to make it accessible to students and others who are not academic specialists in the fields of rhetoric and culture studies."

According to Barry, Sloop's approach in the classroom is energetic and passionate. "Students—many of whom, like the rest of us who know him well, just call him 'Sloop'—love him because he is deeply engaged in trying to get them to share his enthusiasm for the subject matter. He seems always willing to go that extra mile to connect with students and offer feedback on their work. I would add that he is well known and respected among many faculty at Vanderbilt in various fields because he is a sharp intellect who ranges widely as a thinker and critic."

Sloop's far-ranging interests, aside from television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonius Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate so many topics—and refract them through the lens of mass media and cultural studies—is the key to his appeal as a teacher.

"With a class like Sloop's Rhetoric of the Mass Media, the most valuable lesson for me was learning to look at television, media and

pop culture as a larger reflection of our social values and philosophy," says Matt O'Brien, who graduated from Vanderbilt in 2001 with a degree in communications studies and computer science. O'Brien worked as a producer at *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* for four years before becoming a head writer on the newest entry into late-night talk television, *TalkShow with Spike Feresten*.

"He taught me to develop a much larger perspective and frame while observing media

Besides exciting the passion of its viewers, *Lost* works with a group of characters who reflect all sorts of questions of age, race, gender and even size politics.



or pop culture. That perspective is one of the most crucial skills used in writing something like topical comedy. The larger your perspective, the more funny common threads you can unearth as a result."

While most of Sloop's students won't go on to write for television, the professor sees communications studies as vital to any career. "Communication is the essence of humanity," Sloop says. "If our reality is in large part ideas that humans have created, we should ask ourselves how we get these ideas. It isn't through other

people but through mediated text—so we must deal with the media issue. I'm not worried about students remembering the text but in remembering the ways in which we as a culture look at that text. Frankly, I also worry about the health of democracy in a world with so many mediated sources that the striations of beliefs are becoming so great."

Thanks to John Sloop, Vanderbilt students are challenged to think about those sources and beliefs in ways they never before have. Or, as

O'Brien puts it, "You can watch *Lost* the couch-potato way, or you can watch it the Sloop way. The Sloop way adds a very tangible philosophical aspect to experiencing media that most people don't have the luxury of seeing." ▼

Angela Fox, a freelance writer specializing in the arts and travel, lives most of the year in Nashville, where she also is an actress. Her "Travels with Angela" segment is heard weekly on the nationally syndicated Lifetime Radio for Women.

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most important thing on my mind, she was adamant about the fact that I would need food while waiting until an evacuation plan was made.

Unfortunately, my friends and I had devoured the *baklava* by the next day, when I was to be evacuated with a friend the embassy allowed at the last minute. Packed on a ship bound for Cyprus, we simultaneously felt relief and disappointment. We were glad to be on the safety of the cruise ship, but we were saddened that our plans had been ruined and incensed

about the fate of the city we had grown to love. Traveling from Cyprus to Istanbul to London, we constantly judged each location vis-à-vis Beirut. For some reason we could not clearly define, no city could compare to Beirut's glamorous energy and excitement.

Looking back I'm still mystified why I was never scared of the events unfolding around me in Lebanon. Mostly, I felt excited to be in a war zone for the first time, angry at the Israelis and those who sanctioned their actions, and a curious attachment to the city and those with whom I experienced its cul-

ture, nightlife and its people. Only now can I begin to understand the feelings of my father, my relatives and the Lebanese, who have all gone through similar experiences, only on an immensely greater scale.

Upon arriving home I heard a song by the legendary Lebanese singer Fairuz that somehow perfectly encapsulated my feelings: "To Beirut—Peace to Beirut with all my heart ... / From the soul of her people she makes wine, / From their seat, she makes bread and jasmine. / So how did it come to taste of smoke and fire?" ▼