

## On the right side of the issues

**Charles Krauthammer, the unpredictable, confrontational, neo-conservative journalist, talks to Hillel Kuttler in Washington**



**Krauthammer 'has been to the future, and it works.'**

**A**FTER Israel's shelling of a UN camp in Qana, south Lebanon, last April, killing more than 100 Lebanese refugees, much of the media asked why the IDF fired and whether Hizbullah had provoked it.

Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer had a different take. "What are well-armed UN troops doing allowing guerrillas to fire rockets from within yards of a UN camp? After all, the UN itself says that each UNIFIL post 'is assigned responsibility for ensuring that hostile activities are not undertaken from the areas surrounding it,'" he wrote in the weekly *Standard*, a new American conservative magazine.

When he writes about the Middle East, which he does regularly, Krauthammer maintains that many things aren't right. He has criticized PLO chairman Yasser Arafat for evading Palestinian commitments under the Oslo accords and pronounced himself "absolutely staggered" by Labor's initiation of what he calls not a peace process but a "withdrawal process." Krauthammer also finds

Secretary of State Warren Christopher contemptible for leading what he calls a "hopelessly misguided" foreign policy meant to draw Syrian President Hafez Assad into reaching a peace treaty with Israel.

Then there is Assad. In a *Washington Post* column last June, Krauthammer penned a fictional letter from President Clinton to Assad that opened: "Dear Hafez: You sonofabitch."

Within days, a letter to the editor criticized the paper for permitting a key Arab leader to be mocked in this manner. The author, however, is unrepentant. "Sonofabitch is actually a mild term to describe a world-class thug and butcher," Krauthammer says now. "Even if it had not been a satiric column, even if I had meant it seriously, it would have been perfectly appropriate.... I think it's absolutely disgraceful how we sugar-coat the real nature of some of the thugs on the planet."

Having said that, Krauthammer might still have excused the US approach. "I am not against immoral foreign policies if they

work," he says.

**MANY WASHINGTON** columnists create a niche and park themselves in it, be it foreign affairs, domestic policy, or social justice. While such matters capture his fancy, Krauthammer is apt to tackle any topic. He torpedoes to the heart of an issue and articulates an

argument in a way that leaves admirers impressed by the surprising logic of it all.

In short, Krauthammer, 46, is unpredictable. He wrote one *Post* column glorifying the film *Independence Day*. In a *Time* magazine piece, he wrote, in awe, of how IBM's Deep Blue computer won a game against chess champion Garry Kasparov.

Although a conservative, he's hard to pin down. In the *Post* he criticized plans to transfer a sex criminal to a mental hospital after his prison sentence was completed. He loves books and newspapers but is certain the Internet will eventually supplant them because he has "been over to the future, and it works."

He also cut against the grain of an America that cast Shannon Lucid as a hero for her recent marathon visit to outer space. To Krauthammer, "spending six months in an orbiting phone booth with a couple of guys named Yuri is an apt reflection on our times of domesticated, miniaturized aspirations."

Even when he doesn't have a particular issue in mind, "the Lord provides, with stunning regularity, somebody, somewhere, who does something outrageous, moronic, hilarious, unbelievable, parodic" to write about.

Says Gordon Peterson, a local anchorman on whose weekly program *Inside Washington* Krauthammer is a regular panelist: "He's absolutely brilliant. If I come up one person short, I can use him on both sides. But you can't pigeonhole him, that he'll argue the conservative line.... He was one of the first people to say

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## ISSUES

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[Bob] Dole was running a terrible campaign."

In life, as in writing, Krauthammer jumps around. This is someone who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1986, a mere three years into the business. He studied political science, went to Oxford and

wrote his thesis on John Stuart Mill's concept of aesthetics – "as abstract as you can get," he says – and while there chucked it all in because he decided on medicine instead.

That was his "little crisis" in August 1971, when Krauthammer called Harvard from England to reclaim his spot in their medical school and jetted there the next day. He went on to become a psychiatrist.

On the last day of his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, Krauthammer felt the pull back to politics, and "just as impulsively" headed to Washington in 1978 for a job in mental health policy during the Carter administration.

"I was always interested in a lot of things. I didn't want to restrict what I did," he says.

He's been paralyzed by a spinal-cord injury since a 1972 diving accident. It's a topic he'd rather not highlight. "It's very expensive to be able to have just an ordinary life. My wheelchair is almost the price of a car, my car is practically the price of a modest house, my house – you can imagine the geometric progression here."

Of all the columns he's penned, there's been nothing on living 25 years in this condition, nothing on the rights of the handicapped. "I'd like to say something profound about it and that hasn't quite occurred to me yet," Krauthammer says. "It's just very bad luck I had. I don't see anything more metaphysical than that involved. Everyone has their bad luck. Mine took this form."

KRAUTHAMMER has been prevented, by his disability, from visiting Israel.

He hasn't been here since 1971. On visits in 1968 and 1970 he rented a motorcycle and scooted all over the country. He ventured alone into the heart of the West Bank. Israeli police once detained

him for taking photographs near the border in Kiryat Shmona. He picked grapes on Moshav Nir Etzion and worked on an archaeological dig near the Temple Mount. "I loved it," he says. "It was paradise."

Krauthammer hopes to return this summer with his wife Robyn and son Daniel, 11, but first he wants to take a preliminary trip himself, to see whether it can be done. And that necessitates shipping over his custom-built Dodge Caravan, which is proving to be a logistical headache.

The Krauthammer family has done its fair share of traveling. His brother Marcel was born in Brazil, his mother Thea is Belgian. Krauthammer's late father Shulim was from Galicia and became a naturalized French citizen who fought for France in World War II, and afterwards settled in Cuba where he produced industrialized diamonds, a cutting tool, for the US Army. He later moved to New York – where Charles was born – went into real estate and found himself doing so much of his business in Montreal that he moved the family there.

Krauthammer attended the city's United Talmud Torah through high school before enrolling in McGill University. It was there that his political and journalism careers were launched. At 19 he engineered a coup against the editor of the campus newspaper because it was run by students Krauthammer

calls Maoists. He was then asked to run it, and in his first editor's column he called it: "The one thing I'm proudest about: a defense of pluralism."

"Today [it] seems pretty ordinary. But in the climate of 1969, to defend the right of people to express their views and to say that a newspaper ought to publish all views and not be an instrument of class warfare, was pretty unusual," he says.

These days, Krauthammer accepts the label "neo-conservative" but says he stands out from most "neo-cons" by never having been a radical, of not riding the "great trajectory from left to right" that others had – though he was a Social Democrat in his teens. During the 1980s he wrote fervently against the US pursuing a nuclear weapons test-ban treaty, and on behalf of the Nicaraguan contras.

"Basically, I think that the hard-line Cold Warrior view that I was attached to has been totally vindicated by history. Considering that Communism was the second-greatest evil of this century, to have taken even a very minor part in opposing it was quite satisfying."

Krauthammer seems set for good as a writer, but at the same time does not preclude his jumping back into a previous life. "That's the agony of growing older. You have to close the doors as you go along. ... You finally have to realize you can't do everything."