

“From Pamela to Palestine: Kelly Slater and the Politics of Surf Culture”

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In June 2007, then-eight-time world champion surfer Kelly Slater offered an initially silent criticism of the American "war on terror." The setting was an international competition in Arica, Chile. Entering and exiting the water while mobbed by the local and global press, the artwork covering Slater's surfboard was, to those versed in Iraq War iconography, unmistakable. It transformed images of the conflict, from a militant holding an RPG to a widely circulated photograph of the torture by American forces at Abu Ghraib, into an iPod-style advertisement for a product called the "iRaq." "Why is Paris Hilton going to a halfway house for three weeks bigger news than 500 Iraqis ... being killed in their own country everyday as well as lots of American troops?" he asked in a subsequent essay. "This is not to mention the injured, which is about ten times higher than the fatalities. It's life-changing for so many people. A crime of humanity." This was not the sort of commentary that typically accompanied a sporting event, nor was it what one might have expected from a surfer who had a recurring role in Baywatch and used to date Pamela Anderson and Gisele Bundchen. But, for Slater, it was a moment of "[p]op culture meets political awareness." And Chile seemed like the perfect place to do it. After all, Slater explained, it was the government of that "democratic country that thirty-five or so years ago the United States covertly helped to overthrow. It is in fact not that surprising that Kelly Slater would level such an indictment of U.S. foreign policy. Athletes are not often touted for their intellectual prowess, but Slater possesses a thoughtfulness and intelligence that belies the stereotypes typically associated with his sport. Author Phil Jarratt described him as a "deep and diverse thinker." And Jarratt is, I think, right. Slater has criticized not only the recent U.S. war in Iraq but the years of sanctions and bombing that preceded it. He is self-critical of his environmental footprint. He has spoken in favor of divorcing competitive surfing from its corporate underwriters. He quotes Noam Chomsky. And in 2007 he co-founded "Surfing 4 Peace," which works to "bridge cultural and political barriers between surfers" in Israel and Palestine. If surfing represents a desire for not only pleasure but freedom, it is not difficult to appreciate surfing's appeal to a Palestinian people living for decades under occupation and siege. "We go to the beach to forget about the suffering," twenty-year-old surfer Mohammed Juda of Gaza confessed. "Gaza is like a prison," added cafe owner Bashire Watfa. "There's nowhere to breathe except the beach. Slater's participation in Surfing 4 Peace was significant, both because of the obvious publicity his involvement brought to the endeavor but also because of its symbolic value. Unbeknownst to most of his fans, Slater -- like consumer advocate Ralph Nader, radio personality Casey Kasem, Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, and others who often go unrecognized as such -- is an Arab American. Surfing 4 Peace thus encapsulated the vision of ethnic and religious cooperation that the organization has as its goal. To be sure, such efforts by Slater and others will not, in and of themselves, fundamentally remake the politics of the Middle East. But that is not the point. However inconsequential they may seem, they represent a grassroots effort to bring people together across a political divide -- to employ, that is, modern surf culture in pursuit of an explicitly political end. This paper is situated at the heart of transnational American Studies, highlighting, as it does, the global intersections of American culture and state power. Drawing from my current book project for the University of California Press, it explores the ways that modern surf culture has sought to bridge the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from Slater's co-founding of Surfing 4 Peace to the subsequent efforts of the U.S.-based Gaza Surf Relief and the

American nonprofit Explore Corps in aiding the small but growing community of Palestinian surfers. In examining these recent developments, the paper will locate the political commitments of Slater and his peers within the broader history of surf culture's globalization following the Second World War, including, significantly, its developing political consciousness during the professional surfers' boycott of apartheid-era South Africa.