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Comment

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Should America put the heat to Israel?

Changing and uncertain signals from the Carter administration have stirred apprehension within the Jewish community about a reorientation of American policy in the Mideast. Sharply contrasting views on new directions for U.S. policy are presented here.

George Ball, 67, is a former under secretary of state from both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, who now is outspokenly advocating a new and tougher American stance toward Israel. Ball is an investment banker with the firm of Lehman Brothers. He was interviewed by Mark Bruzonsky, for the new magazine *Politics*. Copyright © 1977 by *Politics* and Other Human Interests. Excerpted by permission.

Taking a contrary view in the article below is Joseph Churba. His book, "The Politics of Defeat: America's Decline in the Middle East," was just published. He is a former Middle East analyst for the Air Force.

Yes!

The price of obduracy and paranoia

George Ball
Interviewed by
Mark Bruzonsky

Question: You have become known as the advocate of the imposed settlement solution. Should the United States impose a settlement? What kind of political and economic leverage would it have?

Ball: I think the phrase "an imposed settlement" is a red herring. It's primarily a design to prevent the United States from exercising any serious influence over the course of events in the Middle East. I really don't understand how anyone can say that the United States government should not decide what kind of a situation it is prepared to subsidize in the Middle East. At the moment, United States subsidies — about \$2 billion a year from the public sector and another \$1 billion or so from the private sector — are indispensable in enabling Israel to maintain itself as a garrison state. It seems to me we

have not only the right but the obligation to decide to what ends we are putting this money — which amounts to \$700 to \$1,000 for every man, woman and child in Israel, depending on how you compute it. We have to judge not only which trade-offs are strategic — that is, how do we balance our relations in the Arab world, the problems of oil, the problems of maintaining Israel as an independent state and so on — but also what is fair and equitable. And to suggest that we can't have an opinion on what is a fair and equitable settlement seems to me outrageous.

Q: What if the Begin government says, "If you think you can tell us what to do because of your money, keep it, and we'll figure out some way to pursue our policies without you."

A: Well, that's an option they have: it's up to them. I think that the American obligation is to try to bring about a sensible solution to this problem. If the Israeli government wants to be obdurate or paranoid, that's unfortunate, but nevertheless, we can only go so far.

Q: You've said that the domestic situation in some Middle Eastern countries does not allow leaders who might want to move in the direction of a settlement to do so. Is the Begin government the victim of an even more intransigent Israeli public?

A: Begin has the support of his party and the Israeli people. If he abruptly changes his policies, he will have difficulties. So if we could help him change his policies by enabling him to say he had to do so to preserve Israel's relationship with the United States, we would be doing him and the Israeli people a service.

Q: If a Geneva conference is convened, what should the Palestine Liberation Organization's role be?

A: I've never really understood the issue of the PLO, as the Israelis have put it forward. To try to get the PLO to agree to support the continued existence of Israel as a condition for its participation in a conference is putting the emphasis in the wrong place. At the end of a conference, the PLO could agree to it. Now, whether the PLO should be represented at all or not seems to me to be a rather misplaced emphasis.

Q: So they should be there in some way?

A: It certainly doesn't bother me. I must say that to the extent the Israelis try to push this question front and

center, they raise a fundamental issue. Evidently the current Israeli government really want a settlement or does it want a continuation of the status quo, in the hope that sooner or later the world will accept the present situation and Israel can try to absorb the occupied territories on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Now, I'm putting this in very crude terms, but I think many Americans have this suspicion and Israel ought to do everything possible to eliminate it.

Q: I assume you're talking about [reverting to] approximately the '67 borders.

A: That's right. And Resolution 242.

Q: And you're also talking about a Palestinian state, which isn't in 242.

A: No, but when I say a Palestinian state, I'm talking about some homeland for the Palestinian people. I think there should be some act of self-determination on their part to determine what it is. If they wanted to become part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan again, that would be fine with me. I have no objection.

Q: There are two parts of the settlement we haven't discussed — the nature of the relationship between the Arab states and Israel, and between the Palestinian state and Israel, and the nature of the guarantees that would be provided Israel and possibly Arab states for their security. What kind of a peace do you envision?

A: Israel is quite right in insisting on a peace that is far more than simply a declaration of nonbelligerency. It should be a real peace with all that goes with it, including de jure as well as de facto relations with other nations, free movement of goods.

Q: Do you really think that the Arabs are now prepared, in the context of this kind of settlement, for real, normal, complete relations with Israel?

A: If they get the settlement, yes, I do.

Q: What about the question of guarantees? Are we talking about the kind of United Nations guarantees which have in the past turned out to be no guarantees at all? Or are we talking about real ones?

A: First, the government of Israel has made it clear that it does not want a formal American guarantee, for quite understandable reasons, because no automatic American guarantee could be given that did not require a very substantial control over Israeli foreign policy. The United States can't say to Israel, "Israel, no matter how you behave or how provocative you are or what you may do, nevertheless the United States is going to come to your defense automatically." This is nonsense. This would be totally inappropriate for a great power. The furthest we've ever gone is in the NATO pact. And the NATO pact, if one reads it carefully, leaves substantial flexibility for America. It is also part of a large collective security system in which there is constant collaboration and constant consultation among the powers.

Q: What can we offer the Israelis if the military dangers grow substantially more severe than they are today?

A: We might be prepared to guarantee maintenance of the boundaries finally arrived at — not a guarantee to the Israeli government, but a guarantee to all sides. I would hope that other countries besides the United States would join us in such a guarantee. Israeli security is ultimately going to depend on their willingness to live in peace with the Arabs and trust their neighbors. And if they're never going to trust their neighbors, there's never going to be peace.

Q: But for many of them — and for many Americans as well — stability in the Middle East and Israel's existence depend upon Arab willingness to live in peace with Israel.

A: Of course. Of course. Otherwise there's no hope. Let's be serious for a moment. If Israel thinks that it can go on as a garrison state forever, dependent on an American subsidy, that's nonsense. The American people are not going to go on forever subsidizing a situation of instability in the Middle East. It isn't going to happen. And this is the hardest truth that Israel's going to have to face in

Q: What if the Middle East remains unstable — even with a settlement — Sadat falls, the Saudi Arabian government is toppled, and the borders to which all agree in a settlement are threatened?

Ball: What is Israel's defense right now? It isn't territory. To say that adding the West Bank is going to give security to Israel is nonsense. There hasn't been a time since 1948 when the boundaries of Israel were in question. All the wars have been fought on Arab territory. To talk about defense in depth in a country as tiny as Israel, to talk about some kind of geographical boundaries as making the difference between security or insecurity seems to me to be overlooking the fundamental realities of modern warfare. Both sides have surface to surface missiles. Both sides have supersonic aircraft. That isn't what gives security.

You know, the whole Napoleonic period was justified by the French beginning in the Revolution with the idea that France had to have "natural frontiers." So for 20 years the Europeans slaughtered one another. France never did achieve those frontiers, but that didn't mean that France was vulnerable.

Q: But many Israelis, probably most, do feel very threatened.

A: Yes, I know, but we can't let American foreign policy be based on the paranoia of other nations.

Q: Saudi Arabia seems to be the underpinning of much of the United States' Middle East policy. Do you agree with people who say that the Saudi decision not to increase oil production and their use of petrodollars are subtle forms of blackmail?

A: What is blackmail? Israel uses every instrument of pressure in the United States. Is that blackmail? I have no indication that the Saudis are using their oil weapon as an instrument of policy. I think the United States government would be mad if it didn't take into account the reality that the Saudi Arabia government can bring about a severe energy shortage for the United States and the rest of the world if it chooses to do so. What we ought to be doing is going full speed to develop our independent sources of production and to reduce our dependence. If one looks at the shambles that is being made of an inadequate energy bill in the Congress, it would make sense for the Israeli lobby to put every effort behind passage of a bill that reduces American dependence on the Arab world.

As long as we're vulnerable, the Saudis don't have to do anything. Just the dirty fact that they can create serious problems for the Western world, not merely by cutting back production but simply by failing to expand, makes them impossible to ignore. There is a curious kind of superstition, that it is somehow indecent for the United States to take into account the energy problem in its policies toward the Arab-Israeli dispute. We would be totally irresponsible not to do so.

Q: What if the stalemate persists?

A: If the stalemate persists and American efforts to bring about a settlement are frustrated, I think first there will be a radicalization of the key Arab governments. The continued frustration will almost certainly result in the replacement of relatively moderate governments by those representing extremist Arab opinion, whether they be from the left or from the right. Perhaps the chance is almost greater they'll be from the right than from the left. If that should occur, then most of the major Arab states would probably feel they had to seek a military solution. They believe they now have the means to do it because they can afford to buy arms and they have an overwhelming numerical advantage — in the states that are contiguous to or near Israel there are more than 30 million Arabs against 3 million Jewish Israelis. That could be a real catastrophe.

Q: And would probably induce Israel to deploy the nuclear weapons it is widely believed to possess.

A: Yes, and I think it's very hard for anyone to foresee the consequences in terms of the East-West confrontation, possible retaliation against Israel and a dozen different things.