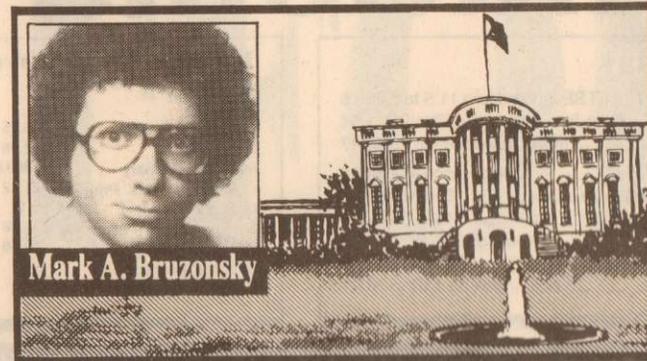


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From



Washington

Time for serious diplomatic warfare

AMERICA is not just a society of fast food and instant gratification. It has become, in recent years, a land of instant news and often rather fickle, fleeting, narrow-minded news analysis.

Furthermore America's attention span is very limited; what is here today can be easily gone tomorrow. The whole society, news media in the lead, focusses attention on one subject today, another tomorrow. What was vitally important last week might be far from the centre of attention the next.

And so, just as so many times in the past, it isn't going to be easy to keep American attention focussed on the Palestinian plight; but its going to be terribly important to try.

For unless those concerned with resolving the Palestinian situation can continue to keep it squarely in front of policy makers in this capital, some weeks from now we'll be back to where we were on May 19, the day before the latest madness of an Israeli gunman in Rishon Le Zion near Tel Aviv transformed the situation.

Just as wars have in the past compressed and focussed diplomatic steps so now must political/emotional moments such as the present be seized upon and manipulated—precisely while the pressure is on, precisely while the temperature is hot, precisely before the tension of the moment is lost.

For the past few days the spotlight of national attention here has been clearly focussed on last Sunday's Palestinian massacre, and the ensuing ripples of hatred, revenge, and bloodshed ever since.

Not since the Intifada erupted nearly two and a half years ago has there been such a fixation on the plight of the Palestinians and the oppression of the Israelis.

Monday evening (May 21), for

example, on Cable News Network's popular *Crossfire* talk show, the Egyptian and Israeli ambassadors had it out with each other in a rather childish display of emotional and rhetorical confusion. Co-host Michael Kinsley repeatedly found it necessary to interject himself between the two as they verbally duelled and collided.

Just a few hours later an only marginally more civil exchange took place on ABC's *Nightline* pitting Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, against Palestinian intellectual and activist Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi. This time it was Ted Koppel who had to act as referee quite literally separating the two combatants as they abused each other and entangled themselves in each other's rhetoric.

As I wrote it seemed likely Yasser Arafat will soon be coming to these shores to participate in the Security Council session in New York. For Arafat, events of the past few days offer a kind of rejuvenation he has so badly needed.

If Arafat is successful in manipulating this crisis to his advantage—and he is in desperate need of any kind of political success to prop up his lack-lustre and confused leadership—American and world attention will not dissipate but will rather slide from the massacre and violence back to the central issue of Palestinian independence.

It won't be difficult for Arafat to grab headlines for a few days. His very presence in the US and at the UN has been made such an issue in past years pretty much all he has to come.

It's not even a question of what he will do when he is here. For that script can be pretty well written in advance at this point.

The real key issue is what will happen when Arafat leaves, when the traditional Security Council resolution is added to

the pages of UN history, and when the press's attention begins to shift again, as it must, to the next issue.

This time, fortunately, the calendar itself is favourable to the Palestinians giving them a helping hand to keep their issue front and centre.

Shortly after a Arafat speech at the UN Security Council comes the Baghdad summit. If he's truly successful, his UN visit and his departure for Baghdad will



Mikhail Gorbachev

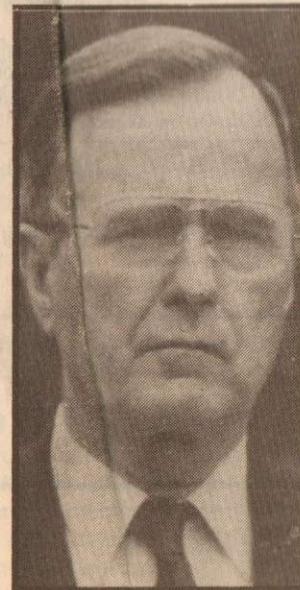
merge into each other giving the Palestinians a long period of primary attention before world opinion, especially American opinion.

And right after the Arab summit comes the superpower summit in Washington.

It is absolutely vital at this point that the Palestinians and their friends do everything possible to create the conditions where George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev will find themselves unable to avoid taking up the Arab-Israeli issue directly with each other. For what they might decide at the summit could well

determine the future diplomatic course in the Mid-east for the next year or two.

What is absolutely vital is that Arafat does not allow the situation to turn again, as it has so often before, towards rhetorical success but diplomatic nonchalance. For Arafat should have learned by now that waiting for others to come forward with plans of their own is usually a formula for more delay and obfuscation. What is needed



George Bush

now is a serious Palestinian and Arab plan that is pushed forward and not deviated from. It's time for Arafat and the Arabs to lead rather than follow, initiate rather than respond.

At this historical juncture, at this likely turning point in Mid-east relationships, the Palestinian and Arab leadership needs to be assertive rather than responsive, to be purposeful rather than just to reply. Waiting for the other parties to take the initiative, allowing them to do so, is only going to squander the historical moment.

In the past the Arabs have

always been defeated by more daring and resourceful Israeli initiatives on the military battlefield; followed by more crafty and cunning diplomacy and public relations.

Needed now is Arab leadership that can capitalise on the historical moment and outmanoeuvre those who stand in the way of the kind of honourable peace that they have been seeking.

What does this mean? Being assertive in this way means, most importantly, going quickly beyond the constraints already established by both Israel and the US.

The talks in Tunis are of minor importance at best—simply another means of passing messages and buying time. And the proposed talks in Cairo are little better—talks about more talks supposed then to lead to pseudo-elections for future discussions about an autonomy process are simply not what the situation cries out for.

What's needed very badly is a serious political breakthrough which puts Israeli Zionism and Palestinian nationalism face to face—and which does so before it's too late, before time runs out, before the forces of radicalism and despair overrun the moment.

And the events of recent days have finally now given the Palestinians an unexpected chance to push forward towards this kind of a serious political confrontation.

No longer should Israel and the US be allowed to pursue their step-by-step, one-party-at-a-time dance. This approach has always worked to the advantage of the Israelis and always been designed specifically to avoid reaching final peace agreements.

And no longer should the internal feuds and Arab conflicts to be used against their collective best interests.

Now that the Cold War has pretty much ended, and now when there is again a perceived danger of renewed war in the Mid-east region—an area that can well be described as the tinder box of the world—the time has finally arrived for a serious international conference and a truly comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Arabs.

Comprehensive doesn't mean immediate. And international doesn't mean a free for all. Rather what's involved here is forcing a political process to be initiated that is designed to clear the way for an eventual peace agreement with Israel that can be lived with by all the major parties.

The well-known cliché—"there's strength in unity"—is certainly apropos. So let us hope Yasser Arafat's second UN visit followed by his Palestinian-inspired Arab summit in Baghdad will be steps towards such unity—unity which is the prerequisite for the needed political assertiveness. If so, there will finally be a bit of justification in being a bit hopeful for a change.

Postscript: The Security Council's decision to convene in Geneva to hear Yasser Arafat and then return to New York changes little. We do not as yet know the full story of how this decision was made. If it was designed to show the US that the international community can act on its own, that the US has to bear the onus of acting as it does, then this should be seen as a positive development. But if, as seems more likely unfortunately, the decision was taken in co-ordination with Washington to in effect get the Bush administration off the hook, then it should be seen as another unfortunate step—for precisely keeping the US on the hook is what the situation desperately requires.