

Fresh bid to understand Arabs

GEORGE Bush has now followed the historic war with Iraq with an opening run at the persistently dangerous Arab-Israeli imbroglio.

Like his predecessor Ronald Reagan did in September 1982 shortly after the climax of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut, Bush quickly realised the importance of offering hope to the Arabs regarding the Israeli dilemma.

While not actually taking any concrete steps to bring Israel into compliance with international law and to its seat at the bargaining table, Bush has nevertheless used language and gestures that at least arguably might lead somewhere other than to more stalemate, tension and eventually another round of war.

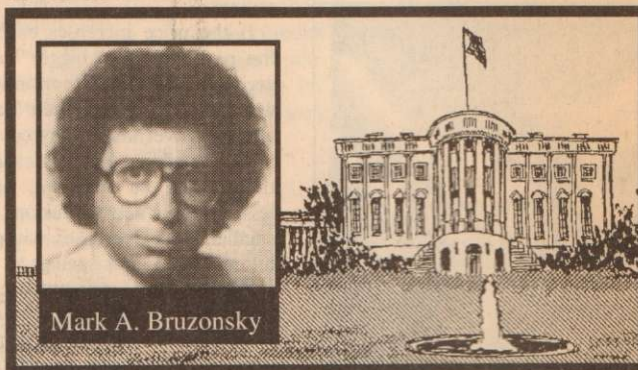
Whatever President Bush's actual intentions in future months, notwithstanding his limited political leeway to go forward, a climate of expectation has been purposefully built-up.

And now with each passing week, then month, Bush may find that he will have to talk a little more convincingly if his words are not to be judged mere cosmetics.

This climate of expectations, coming on top of the trauma of events since last August, is of course not happening in isolation from other developments within American society.

For instance, new groups and organisations that previously did not have much involvement with matters Mid-

From



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eastern are beginning to get their feet wet, beginning to ask questions, beginning to believe that something has to be done to defang the Arab-Israeli monsterman.

Last Saturday, for instance, a group of organisations having its headquarters in the San Francisco area, did go to weigh in to try to bring about a little more "Mid-east understanding".

It's a sign of the times here. The Mid-east is now more than on the American map; it's been added to the American mentality. American's remain engaged, interested, and concerned about the region in ways that would have been hard to conceive just a few short months ago.

Clearly the year 1991 will be recorded as the year in which a major shift occurred in Ameri-

can engagement with issues Mid-eastern, regardless of what now happens in Iraq and Kuwait.

"On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. On January 17, 1991, coalition forces led by the United States attacked Iraq in order to force the Iraqis to leave Kuwait. Thus began the seventh war in the Mid-east in our generation."

This is the lead quote on the back cover of the programme announcing the Tamalpais Institute's "Understanding Arab Perspectives: A National Conference in Response to the Gulf War" which took place all day on Saturday, March 23.

The conference which actually was held in the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, was telecast on closed circuit by the "Beyond War" organisa-

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tion to some hundred sites all around the country. And CNN's cameras were there as well to bring parts of the conference to people all over the world.

"If we are to break this cycle of armed conflict we must have greater understanding", the conference brochure continues. "Leading figures from Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, United States, West Bank and Soviet Union are coming together to discuss issues relevant to the conflict and search for reconciliation."

Four associated organisations from the San Francisco area are co-sponsoring the conference: The Commonwealth Club, the World Affairs Council of Northern California, the Telluride Institute, and the Tamalpais Institute whose new focus is Mid-east peace.

In addition to the luncheon Keynote Speech by Jordan's Crown Prince Hassan, the plenary address by former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban, and a private \$250 a plate dinner featuring both Hassan and Eban, other major addresses were satellited in.

Former Soviet foreign minister Edward Shevardnadze spoke from Moscow in his first major address since his resignation. And former US national security adviser in the Carter administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski, came in via satellite from Washington.

In addition Georgetown University Professor Hisham Sharabi, who was instrumental in organising this affair, gave a major talk as did Dr Sam Keen, author of *Faces of the Enemy*, a unique book recently made into a Public Television special.

Other conference particulars included Professor Hanan Ashrawi from Birzeit University on the West Bank; Fawzi Hammad Al-Sultan, the coordinator for reconstruction and planning for post-war Kuwait and a member of the Board of Directors of the World Bank; and Professor Saad Ibrahim from the American University in Cairo.

So much for the purposes, and participants. I was in San Francisco attending the conference on March 23. And my next column will focus on what was said...and what wasn't.