

ANXIETIES AND ILLUSIONS

WHATEVER they say in public, Jim Baker and George Bush are worried and anxious these days.

This isn't to say Bush is likely to be defeated in November of next year. Nor is it to suggest that things couldn't have turned out much worse than they have. At this point Bush can well afford the ten percent public opinion loss of recent days. Certainly he couldn't expect to remain at the unprecedented 91 percent ratings of March.

Rather the point is that the military victory over Iraq that liberated Kuwait has left the Bush administration seized with difficult matters Mid-eastern as never before. And Washington is beginning to appreciate that the region has characteristics of political quicksand tending to make extrication more difficult the more one tries.

That's why Bush and his key advisers are determined not to get trapped in the sand. For all of Bush's protestations that the Vietnam syndrome is behind us, it is that very memory which is propelling Bush to find a way out before the quicksand grasps hold.

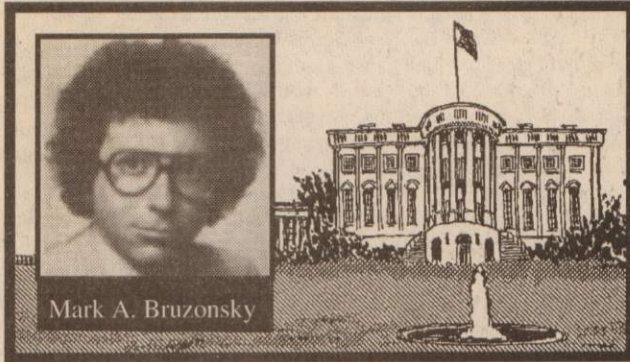
"I don't want one single American soldier shoved into a civil war in Iraq that's been going on for ages. And I'm not going to have that!" Bush has been repeating in one way or another for some days now. Meanwhile, the images of the Kurdish refugees in the north and the Shi'ite refugees in the south of the country just bombed back to pre-industrialisation to have Americans perplexed and guilty.

Enjoyment

As Rightwing pundit George will put it a few days ago, "the peace is not nearly as much fun as the war was". American enjoyment of the war was supposedly a partial vindication of the war, which was supposed to be therapeutic, making us "feel good about ourselves". But the aftermath is depressing.

In this aftermath of the American expeditionary force's liberation of Kuwait — all the while facing the lingering recession at home; a potential banking crisis that seems to continually creep forward; and a nagging combination of unemployment, crime and drugs — official Washington is realising it is going to have to continue to pay a lot of attention and expend a lot of energy dealing with issues in the region of the Mid-east for a long time to come. But doing so with American troops on the ground is going to eventually cause much trouble both at

From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

Washington



James Baker



George Bush

home and for the leaders of the Gulf as well.

Nevertheless, troubling questions are unavoidable now that Americans are seized with matters taking place in the Mid-east.

What about the calls for democracy in Kuwait? What will become of the still growing new refugee masses in Iraq's north and south? What about the huge war debt still owed to the US by allies? What about the growing dangers of Islamic democrats and the political instabilities that have been exacerbated by the recent war? What about impending arms sales to Gulf countries, opposed by powerful forces in Washington and congressionally disallowed until all war debts are paid?

And what about actually making good on the promise to bring home "all" the American troops while still setting up some kind of permanent American military presence in the region?

Add to these perplexing questions, of course, that of what can actually be done — not just what can be said — about the seemingly ever-present Arab-Israeli imbroglio?

Indeed, one of the major reasons for all the current talk about "progress" in reigniting some kind of Arab-Israeli

"peace process" can be found less in the likelihood that something major is about to happen and more in the intricacies of political images and the need for the perception of political progress.

Political movement is at the moment a goal in itself. Such movement creates the illusion of progress and provides cover from the critics who want answers to all these escalating questions.

Meanwhile, however, the basic and inescapable realities are that the Israelis have no intention of yielding on the basic issue of a Palestinian homeland; while the Bush administration lacks both the will and the clout to force the Israelis to do so.

Theatrics

Thus a game of political theatrics is underway with image far far more important than substance.

Indeed, if ever the importance of imagery over reality was front and centre is in today's Washington milieu.

Telling contemporary examples abound.

A woman by the name of Kitty Kelly writes an unsubstantiated account of Nancy Reagan — including a bit of recycled material about "old blue eyes", Frank Sinatra's, extended visits to the family quarters

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at the White House with the First Lady — and Washington is all agog. Varoom! Leading the chorus, *The New York Times* is manipulated into being a kind of intellectual *National Inquirer* featuring the book on page one; plus doing so a day ahead of the competition precisely as Kelly's publisher, Simon and Schuster planned it.

With hours talk show hosts bumble all over themselves dropping Stormin' Norman Schwartzkopf for the latest celebrity, Ms Kelly. And in the process of justifying her multimillion advance, Kelly gives indications of being more akin to imprisoned PTL evangelist Jim Baker than a serious investigative writer.

About the same time another woman comes forward with charges of immoral assault at the Kennedy compound in Florida. In an orgy of sensationalism hundreds of lemming-like reporters flock to Miami eager for any bit of titillation and willing to pay any price.

Just a few weeks before a Los Angeles amateur video tapper catches police in the act of beating a Black man. Woosh! The country is mesmerised into finally considering a basic problem that has gone on in L.A. and other key cities for a long long time...but with little

farefare.

Clearly our new age -- not 'new order' mind you -- is one of imagery over reality, illusion rather than substance, opinion poll decision-making rather than hard-headed leadership.

And this is as true when it comes to Arab-Israeli diplomacy as it is concerning new chapters in the real-life Kennedy soap opera, Kitty Kelly's cash register explosions, or L.A. police brutality scandals.

Images

Thus the president and his secretary of state — with their assorted teams of image-makers and slogan-producers — are striving mightily to stay on top of the images. Doing so becomes the primary goal; actual political accomplishments secondary.

In all likelihood there is little Bush and Baker are actually going to be able to do about many of the key questions listed above, including bringing about a solid Arab-Israeli peace.

But with images counting far more than accomplishments the illusion of political movement is in itself its own victory. Thus Baker chose to join hands with Israel's Prime Minister Shamir a few days ago jointly declaring another "peace plan" rather than go away sulking.

For in actual fact Baker achieved nothing at all.

The Israelis continue not only their policy of total intransigence vis-a-vis the Palestinians, but they are even building more settlements and settling more Jews in Palestinian lands while Baker is among them!

Practically in the same breadth these days Shamir declares Israeli willingness to abide by key UN resolutions and attend some kind of regional conference while at the same time enunciating his complete refusal to accept the "land-for-peace" approach embodied in these resolutions and at the heart of any negotiations.

It's a masterly performance on his part. Shamir has been badly underestimated all along. And the Bush-Baker duo have chosen to play along rather than fight.

It's the job of the press, of course, to be staying on top of these developments, to be putting them in perspective, to be pointing out the differences between words and actions, images and realities.

Thus the politicians and the establishment press have one major thing in common. Neither is doing its job very well. Yet both are enjoying the illusions created by their mutually symbiotic interaction.

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