

Americans want to believe!

MATTERS Mid-eastern are still front and centre here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the American heartland.

Trials in Kuwait; settlements in the occupied territories; arms sales to the region; Kurds in Iraq; past political blunders... All these matters remain topical daily as the parades and celebrations for America's returning heroes go on throughout the nation.

The other day President George Bush took a little trip out to another part of the heartland, to the capital of Minnesota, St Paul. The president was there to promote his "Educational Presidency" and his plans for "America 2000" -- a few more of the slogans this administration is so adept at concocting without equal measure of substance.

A few hecklers took Bush on; but that's nothing new really. And then the president sat down at a grade school computer terminal and typed out a simple message -- quite clearly something planned in advance for huge letters began appearing on the screen.

The message: "I wanted to be president so I could help people and bring peace to the world."

It was typical George Bush showmanship. But even more it was vintage Americana -- simple sloganeering for a people who desperately want to believe in God and country and the old, traditional virtues. And in their president too.

One of my last columns focused on an afternoon-long Midwest forum a few weeks ago that zeroed in on the Arab-Israeli imbroglio -- the George F. Kennan Forum On International Affairs sponsored by the Institute of World Affairs, affiliated with the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, and the city of Milwaukee.

The first half of that forum was taken up with presentations by some of the various belligerents and protagonists.

Egyptian ambassador Raouf Al-Reedy, a well-dressed politician mannequin, managed to mouth the typical variety of Egyptian platitudes that have become so well-known since the separate treaty with Israel now a dozen years in the past.

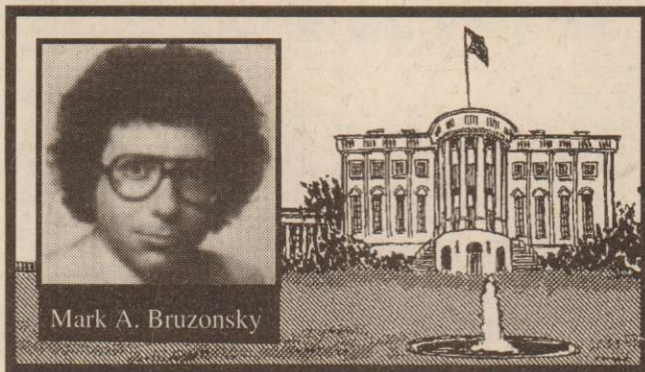
A far more candid and animated Jordanian ambassador Hussein Hammami focused on the the possibility of water-inspired wars in the future, and of course the urgency of the Palestinian problem.

Palestinian intellectual, Muhammad Hallaj, director of the Palestine Research and Educational Centre, poked fun at today's much-touted "peace process" and the inconsistencies and hypocrisies so prevalent in examining how easy it seems to be for American attitude and principles to radically shift depending on which political issue is being discussed.

And Dr Shai Feldman, substituting for an Israeli ambassador who didn't want to bother, perfectly represented the mainstream Israeli approach that keeps blaming the Arabs for everything -- with a fast-talking combination of disingenuousness and deceptiveness.

And then it was the turn of the Americans -- all establishment players, so no one rocked the boat very much.

From



Washington

Neumann reentering

Former ambassador to Saudi Arabia Robert Neumann, pictured below, now aging and feeble of body but not of mind, likes to attend these kinds of gatherings. He's entertaining and witty much of the time. But at the end of the day, after such a long career in official Washington, he's mostly an apologist not only for the Bush administration -- after having been a government personality in the preceding Reagan era -- but also for the Arab powers that be.



Neumann's basic points:

-- The war against Iraq was necessary. Sanctions wouldn't have worked in time largely because it was not likely the political coalition could have lasted long enough.

-- "Change with stability" is the best prescription for the future of the Gulf; and this is precisely what can be expected from the leading country, Saudi Arabia.

-- Bush will try to lead the region to an Arab-Israel peace, and to do so he will have to pressure the Israelis. But can he press the Israelis? "Not quite yet ... he needs more cards ... he needs more signs from the Arabs, especially Syria ... he would have to make an all-out attempt and the political risk are very great"

"I've known President Bush fairly well for 20 years," Neumann concluded. "I believe him to be a determined man who is willing to go to the end. Is he willing to take that enormous risk to stake almost everything on this?"

Obey trying to lead

Congressman David Obey is Chairman of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee; and a Democrat from northern Wisconsin.

And Obey is as well one of the few current members of Congress willing to speak up a bit about where to place responsibility for the current roadblocks in the Israeli-Arab "peace process".

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The main points made by Obey:

-- "The time is past for diplomatic speaking; the time is here for bluntness and plain speaking."

-- Israel should recognise Palestinian rights and end settlements.

-- The Arabs should send a clear signal that peace will result in normalised relations with Israel.

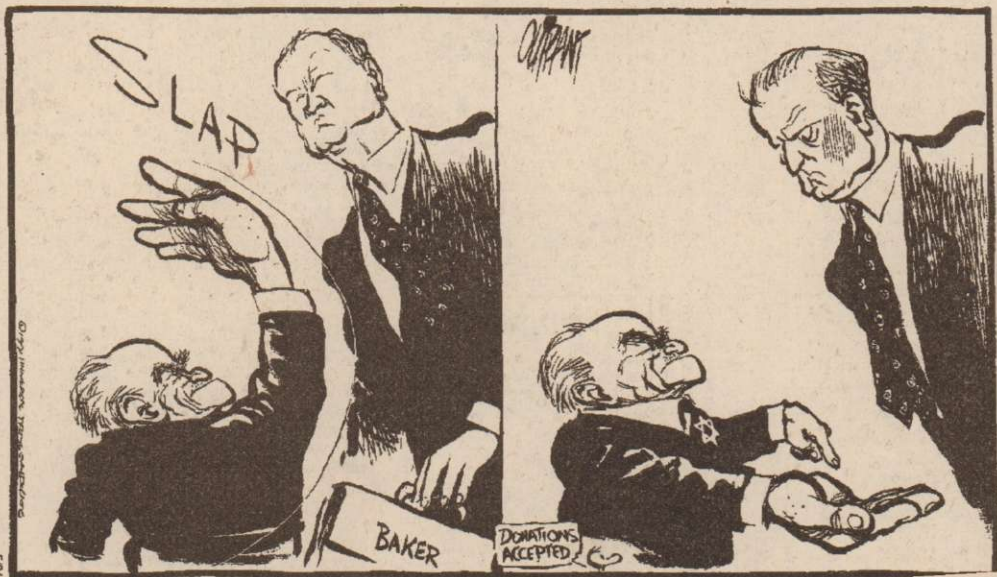
-- The US should not sell arms anymore to anyone in the region until we get their diplomatic cooperation.

-- We need a sense of urgency -- a sense that doesn't seem to be coming from the Israelis and the Arabs themselves -- and Americans ought "to have enough guts to not take 'no' from either side."

-- It's time for the US to be "insistent and persistent".

State bureaucrat

Not much to report here. The State Department was reluctant to send anyone at all during these sensitive days. But in the end a young Egyptian desk officer, Ms Melinda Kimble, was dispatched. She did little but quote her boss, Secretary Baker, wish everyone well, and embarrass the American government for not sending someone serious.



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