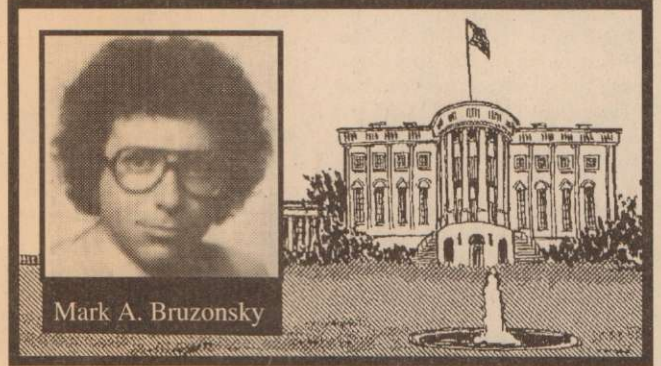


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PUBLIC POLITICAL THEATRICALS

From



Washington

IN this age of instant communications directly from the scene of happenings worldwide — and often directly with the actual participants in ongoing historical developments — modern politics, even modern warfare, have become intertwined with public political theatrics.

In eras past back-room political manoeuvring in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms dominated; today it is what and how things are presented to the public through the ever-vigilant, ever-present, and often ever-used media that takes centre stage.

Short video clips and sound-bites have come to often dominate public perceptions. And public perceptions in turn then rebound to influence the events underway.

This very cycle of statement, press coverage, public reaction then lead to a new cycle of the same. This dynamic in fact has come to dominate modern-day events that heretofore were the province of politicians and foreign policy professionals in the wheeling-dealing back-rooms of power.

Today, the public political theatre seems to be increasingly ongoing and never-ending. Today modern-day communications make it possible for actual events — be they in the deserts of Arabia or the "White House" in Moscow — to be significantly affected by how the press handles the story and by what public perceptions result.

Nearly everything these days seems to be increasingly carried out in the public glare as never before in history. Nearly everything has a public relations aspect. Nearly everything is the province of "handlers" and media specialists.

Indeed we are now living in a political "real-time" world, a world in which political leaders have to be increasingly sensitive to the actual interplay of what they are doing at the moment with what the media is saying about what they are doing and with how the public is reacting to what they are saying and doing.

And political "victory", it now seems, is as often deter-

mined by how one positions oneself in front of the public as by the actual positions one is pursuing.

Into this new political real-time world, just a few days ago, George Bush strode up to the White House microphones to tell all of his intention to veto, if need be, the much much-ballyhooed \$10 billion "loan guarantees" package for Israel.

In some ways, especially in these days of complex and convoluted Mid-east diplomacy, it seemed a bit strange that all the president was making such a big deal about was a four-month delay. All the more so as he seemed to be giving Israel a pledge that the US would actually make up for any additional costs involved to Israel during this four-month period.

And furthermore, though not publicly promising to actually back the unprecedented package in January, the implication of Bush's comments was that in just a few months he would go along with the unprecedented step of guaranteeing such huge amounts of a foreign country's obligations, or at the least he wouldn't urge any further congressional delays.

What's really been going on these past few days, of course, is rather different than how things have been presented in the theatre of public opinion.

Behind today's headlines about "loan guarantees" many key figures in the American administration are understandably rather worried that the long-touted Mid-east peace conference the president and secretary of state have stapled their administration to is much more of a non-starter than anybody wants to admit; that all the talk of tremendous progress in bringing about an upcoming peace conference is much more smoke than fire.

Bush and Baker have presented themselves as political miracle men because, they keep saying, they've been able to get the Arabs and the Israelis to agree to talk to each other for the very first time.

But this is hardly the real case. For one thing the parties involved all have their own

reasons for wanting to talk to each other. Israel, in its own crafty way, has tried to pick off one negotiating partner after another from among the Arabs. And most of the key Arab parties have been trying to get to an international conference with Israel for quite some time, certainly at least back to the Arab Fez summit conference a decade ago now.

What's always been extremely contentious, though — and indeed remains so — is just *how* are the parties going to talk to each other and just *what* are they going to talk about.

True, Bush and Baker have made a bit of small progress on the *how*, but even that is something many of the various parties — except for major factions with the Palestinian camp — have actually been willing to accept for some time now.

Rather than a conference symbolised by the United Nations and all the Security Council resolutions, Israel wants to avoid like the plague, what's in store now is an American-engineered affair with the Soviet Union and the Europeans acquiescently legitimising and vigilantly watching how Washington conducts the show.

Anyway, for whatever reasons, the Arab parties, including Syria, are willing to play along with the *how*. And this is the case even with the Israelis loudly and continually doing their political cat-calling about how the conference has to end quickly, break up into bilateral talks, and never ever reconvene!

But when it comes to *what* is actually going to be talked about at the conference, the Bush administration, like the Reagan administration of which it is in so many ways a continuance, is fooling itself if it thinks it can substitute shadow for sunlight.

Worse than that really. Bush and Baker, building on the legacy of American duplicity over Israeli-Palestinian issues for so long now, have actually brought us all to a very dangerous moment in the Mid-east.

The basic question to keep

in mind is: What happens when all the hyped hope proves illusory?

Looked back from the perspective of a few years in the future, today's events may be considered more the diplomatic eye of a terrible political hurricane, just a temporary lull as the powerful centrifugal rebuild themselves for another assault on the entire region and on American empirical interests in the area.

What's really going on in Washington today is a bit of a pre-panic.

Bush and his top officials are well aware that both the Carter and the Reagan administrations before them got entangled and entrapped in the quicksand of the Mid-east. Jimmy Carter, naive good-being that he was, was destroyed by the hostage crisis which itself had been partly stimulated by his administration's policies in Lebanon and the myopic concessions and Pyrrhic political victories that became the Camp David separate between Egypt and Israel.

Reagan, of course, was nearly brought down by the Iran-Contra scandal; one which the Israelis actually instigated, much as they were intimately involved in the bringing together of the political will in Washington to destroy Iraq last year.

Now, in the wake of that American brutalisation of the region and in order to attempt to fulfil promises made to various Arab parties who were part of the anti-Iraq coalition, George Bush has promised not only a "new world order" but an unprecedented Arab-Israeli peace conference. But in reality Bush can deliver neither of these and must instead find himself a way to glide through next year's election while still keeping his promises credible and the Mid-east region under control.

All the "new world order" talk was never really anything more than Bush's way of proselytising his American flock to follow him as he charged into the Arabian desert with unprecedented American forces to teach the Arabs who were defying Washington a lesson.

Now all today's talk of a historic breakthrough leading to a "Mid-east Peace Conference" is primarily designed to keep the parties hoping rather than fighting, to keep the lid on the simmering convulsions just below the surface throughout much of the region, and to pacify public opinion at home as well as abroad.

Bush is a masterful wordsmith but no magician; he is indeed a master, along with James Baker, of public political theatrics.

But Bush is largely substituting new phraseology for seriously real new policies. It's the old new-wine-in-old-bottles metaphor writ largest. Bush comes from the old schools of American interests and American manifest destiny — the patrician ways of thinking of his ancestors are deep within him.

And so Bush is not bringing us into a bold new world, he's just changing the rhetoric of the past to fit the anxieties and anticipations of the present.

A Mid-east peace between Israel and the Arabs is indeed possible — primarily because the Arab side is ready to sign on the dotted line if only Israel will give the regimes in power a chance to do so.

But such a real peace is not going to be brought about by rhetorical slights-of-hand and crafty political magic tricks — what the current American administration excels in.

Real peace requires real policy changes — and these are not likely to come from George Bush's Washington. And for Israel to make those changes, those in charge in the Zionist entity will have to first come to understand that Washington has already been sailing off in a truly new direction and there is not really any choice but for Israel to follow.

We're all in, I fear, for a great deal many delays, frustrations, disappointments, and possibly explosions in the weeks and months immediately ahead.

The road to peace is going to be tortuous; and a betting man would still at this time give odds that the end won't be achieved anytime soon.