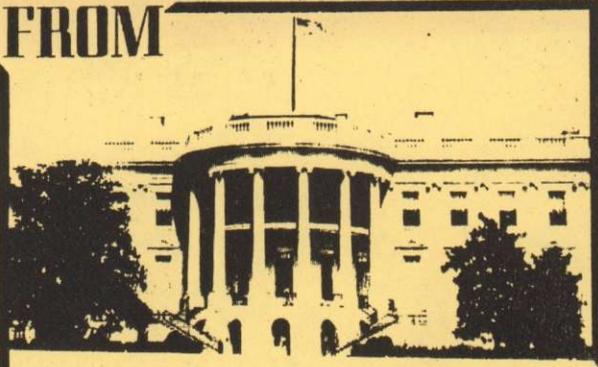


FROM



WASHINGTON



By Mark Bruzonsky

Don't expect real progress on Mideast peace; image counts, reality doesn't

WASHINGTON - Whatever they say in public, Jim Baker and George Bush are worried and anxious and troubled 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% ratings of March!

ANALYSIS

Rather the point is that the military victory over Iraq that liberated Kuwait has left the Bush Administration besieged with difficult matters Middle Eastern as never before. And Washington is beginning to sweat over the realization that the region's political quicksand makes extrication more difficult the more one tries.

That's why George 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 grabs hold.

The peace is not nearly as much fun as the war was.

"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 Shiite refugees in the south of the country just bombed back to pre-industrialization have Americans perplexed and guilty.

As right-wing pundit George Will casually 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 at home the lingering recession; a potential banking crisis that seems to continually creep forward; and a nagging combination of unemployment, crime and drugs - official Washington is realizing it is going to have to continue to pay a lot of attention to

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

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

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

Telling contemporary examples abound. 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 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 Enquirer featuring the book on page 1; plus doing so a day ahead of the competition precisely as Kelly's publisher, Simon and Schuster, planned it.

Within hours talk show hosts bumble all over themselves dropping Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf for the latest celebe, Ms. Kelly. And in the process of justifying her multi-million dollar advance, Kelly gives indications of being more akin in showmanship to imprisoned PTL evangelist Jim Bakker than a serious investigative writer.

About the same time another woman comes forward with charges of sexual assault at the Kennedy estate in Florida. Bang! 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 taper catches police in the act of beating a black man. Woosh! The country is mesmerized 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 fanfare till the video.

Clearly our new age (there is no "new order") is one of imagery over reality, illusion rather than substance, opinion poll decision-making rather than hard-hitting 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.

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 are quite 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 for more than

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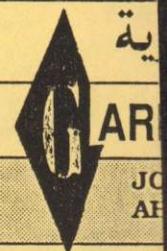


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Washington is realizing it is going to have to continue to pay a lot of attention and expend a lot of energy dealing with issues in the region of the Middle East for a long time to come.

But doing so with American troops on the ground could eventually cause much political trouble both at home as well as for the leaders of the Gulf now closely aligned with the West for their own protection.

Nevertheless, troubling questions are unavoidable.

What about the calls for democracy in Kuwait? What will become of the still growing refugee masses in Iraq's north and south? What about the huge war debt still owed to the U.S. by allies, including Saudi Arabia, which now wants to pay in oil rather than cash? What about the growing dangers - so perceived in Washington and by the rulers in most Arab capitals - of Islamic fundamentalism and Arab nationalism, both significantly exacerbated by the recent war? What about impending major arms sales to Gulf countries - sales opposed by powerful forces in Washington and Congressionally disallowed until all war debts are paid?

Most perplexing of all at the moment, what about actually making good on the promise to bring home "all" the American troops while on the other hand 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 re-igniting 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 appearance of political progress both by Bush and by pro-American Arab leaders.

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

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. He chose to jointly declare another recycled and largely Israeli-designed "peace plan" rather than go away sulking and have to admit no breakthroughs are foreseeable after all.

For in actual fact Baker achieved nothing at all. His sleight of hand diplomacy is further proof of ongoing Israeli-American duplicity and manipulation.

The Israelis continue not only their policy of total intransigence vis-a-vis the Palestinians. They were even building more settlements, settling more Jews in Jerusalem and the occupied territories, and stepping up the unconscionable repression on the entire Palestinian population as Baker was among them!

Practically in the same breath these days Shamir declares Israeli willingness to negotiate while continually trampling not only on the Palestinians' right to choose their own negotiators but also on the basic U.N. resolutions that are to be the very framework of the negotiations!

It's a masterful performance on his part; for Shamir has been badly underestimated all along. In partial acknowledgement of this 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 put them in perspective, to be pointing out the differences between words and actions, to be uncovering the deeper truths which politicians attempt to obfuscate with false images.

But these days the politicians and the establishment press have one major thing in common - neither is doing its job very well. Both are enjoying the illusions created by their mutually symbiotic interaction. Both manipulate the public into acquiescence. Both take the easy way out.

Mark Bruzonsky is an American Jewish writer in Washington, D.C. and head of the Jewish Committee on the Middle East (JCOME).

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