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POLITICS & OTHER HUMAN INTERESTS

CONFRONTATION: ISRAEL & GEORGE BALL, FEMINISM BEFORE HOUSTON, LABOR AFTER MEANY

INTERVIEW

WITH GEORGE BALL

George Ball, 67, is a former Under Secretary of State from both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. He won distinction as an early Establishment opponent of American involvement in Vietnam. Talent scouts for the Carter Administration allegedly considered Ball for the top job at State, then recommended Cyrus Vance, who had fewer enemies. Many United States Jews, in particular, would have looked upon Ball's appointment as a threat to America's traditional pro-Israel policy. In his article, "How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself," appearing in the April 1977 issue of Foreign Affairs, Ball in fact advocated a new and tougher American stance toward Israel. The Carter Administration policy since then has tilted toward Ball's view.

Ball is an investment banker with the firm of Lehman Brothers in New York City. He devotes many hours to writing and speaking, and much of that on the Middle East situation. This interview was conducted at the Embassy Row Hotel in Washington, D.C., in October.

MARK BRUZONSKY

POLITICKS: You've been saying that the essential first step toward a positive Middle East policy is for the United States to establish its own independent position. What do you mean?

BALL: Over the years the United States has very often made its decisions regarding Israel in response to . . . I hate the word "pressures," but suggestions, influence, whatever you like, from people who were fundamentally committed to Israel and to its policies. As a result, we haven't been fair to Israel or to ourselves. Very often we have let the more extreme elements in Israel dominate American policy. It seems to me that to play an appropriate role as a great power, the United States has to concentrate first on what its own national interest is. There are situations where the American national interest and the position of the Israeli Government may not be congruent. In fact, situations could develop in which the position of the Israeli Government and the national interests of Israel may not be congruent. This is probably true of every government because every government is a prisoner of its own domestic politics. But when I say we ought to concentrate on the "American national interest," I subsume under this rubric the commitment to the continued existence and prosperity of Israel.

POLITICKS: Has the Carter Administration established an independent position?

BALL: It's very hard to be categorical about it at this point. So far they have. The President, in proposing possible settlements, has taken a very affirmative

and I think a very useful stance. But we don't know yet whether Carter will have the courage and stalwartness to see the Administration's position through under domestic pressure that is going to be very difficult to resist.

POLITICKS: You have become known as the advocate of the imposed settlement solution. Should the United States impose a settlement? What kind of political and economic leverage would it have?

BALL: I think the phrase "an imposed settlement" is a red herring. It's primarily a design to prevent the United States from exercising any serious influence over the course of events in the Middle East. I really don't understand how anyone can say that the United States Government should not decide what kind of a situation it is prepared to subsidize in the Middle East. At the moment, United States subsidies—about \$2 billion a year from the public sector and another \$1 billion or so from the private sector—are indispensable in enabling Israel to maintain itself as a garrison state. It seems to me we have not only the right but the obligation to decide to what ends we are putting this money—which amounts to \$700 to \$1,000 for every man, woman, and child in Israel, depending on how you compute it. We have to judge not only which trade-offs are strategic—that is, how do we balance our relations in the Arab world, the problems of oil, the problems of maintaining Israel as an independent state and so on—but also what is fair and equitable. And to suggest that we can't have an opinion on what is a fair and equitable settlement seems to me outrageous.

POLITICKS: You're saying that we can push a settlement quite strongly because

we're financing Israel's ability to maintain . . .

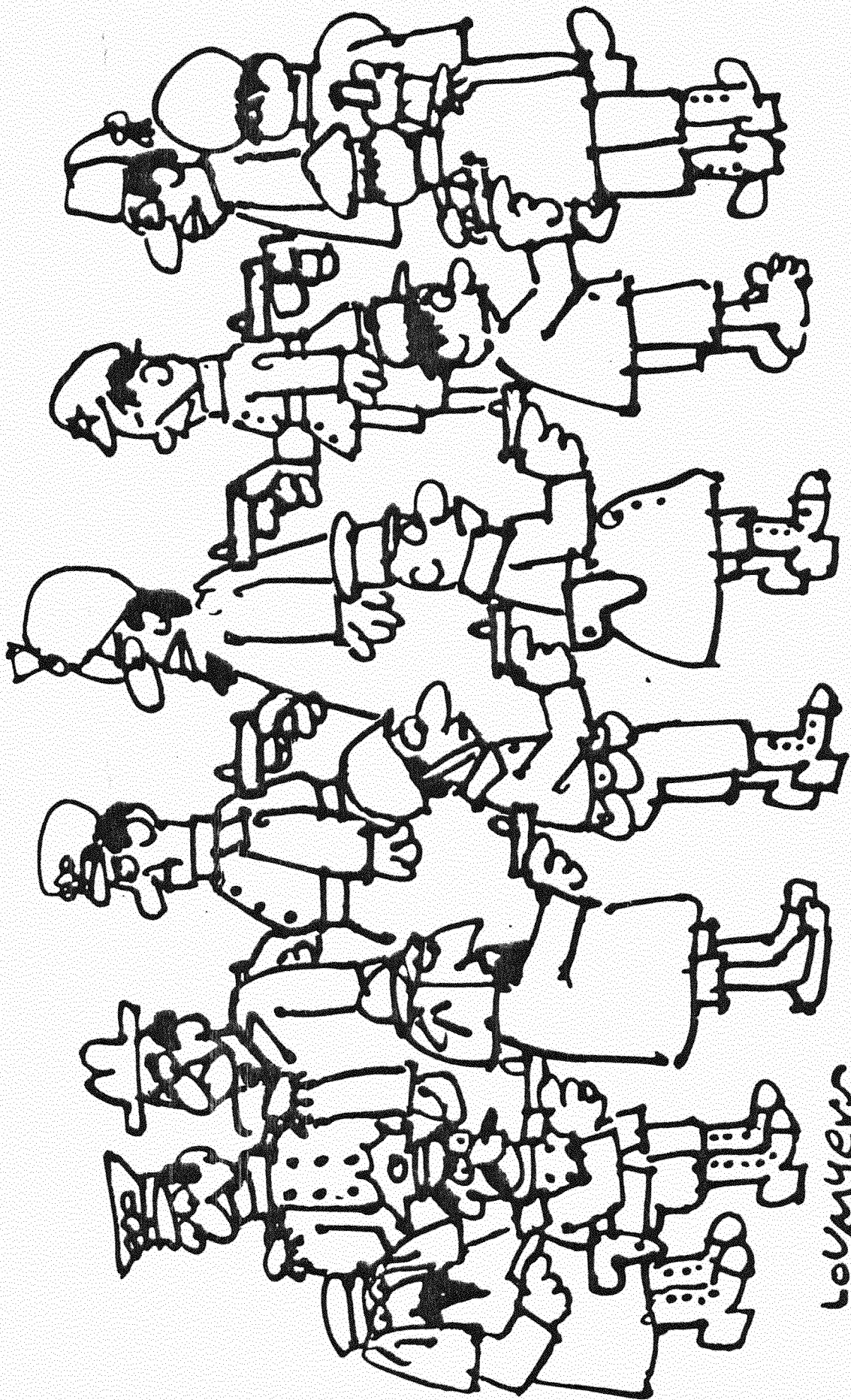
BALL: Why not? Financing Israel is voluntary. We're not required by treaty to do it. We're required simply because we think it's in the American national interest; there's no other justification for pouring out that much.

POLITICKS: But it's the Congress that approves the funds and the Congress traditionally has supported Israeli positions.

BALL: Well, that's a Congressional judgment which is open to challenge like any other judgment. We've got to take a very hard look at the total situation to see what's in the American national interest and, therefore, what we should be prepared to commit these funds for. We ought to say, "Look, if we continue to subsidize the current stalemate, we're subsidizing a catastrophe that is certainly going to be a disaster for the United States as well as for the rest of the free world and, in the long run, for Israel. Why shouldn't we interpose a view of our own? We are not in the habit of giving blank checks, which is what the most fervent Israeli advocates seem to be saying we should do."

POLITICKS: What if the Begin Government says, "If you think you can tell us what to do because of your money, keep it, and we'll figure out some way to pursue our policies without you."

BALL: Well, that's an option they have; it's up to them. I think that the American obligation is to try to bring about a sensible solution to this problem. If the Israeli Government wants to be obdurate or paranoid, that's unfortunate, but nevertheless, we can only go so far.



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POLITICKS: But we would have the same national interests in pushing such a settlement even if we weren't giving Israel money.

BALL: Yes, but we wouldn't have the . . . I hate to use words like "right," but we certainly wouldn't have the basis for pushing for it to the same extent if we weren't providing such a substantial subsidy. Look, what we do with Israel goes far beyond the money. It's a political, moral support which is, I should think, indispensable to Israel's continued position. But we can't prevent any nation in the world from committing suicide if it chooses to do so. That's unfortunate, but it's the choice of that nation. I think that the most that the United States could do is to say this: "We will do everything possible, within reason, to maintain the existence and indeed the prosperity of the Israeli people." We cannot, however, say to the people of Israel, "We will give you a blank check to do anything you want, whether we think it's sensible or not sensible."

POLITICKS: You've said that the domestic situation in some Middle Eastern countries does not allow leaders who might want to move in the direction of a settlement to do so. Is the Begin Government the victim of an even more intransigent Israeli public?

BALL: Begin has the support of his party and the Israeli people. If he abruptly changes his policies, he will have difficulties. So if we could help him change his policies by enabling him to say he had to do so to preserve Israel's relationship with the United States, we would be doing him and the Israeli people a service.

POLITICKS: The United States is current-

ly attempting to decide what to do if a United Nations resolution affirmed Resolution 242 but added wording affirming the legitimacy of the Palestinian national rights claim. Should the United States support this resolution?

BALL: I am inclined to agree with the Administration that opening up Resolution 242 would let every conceivable kind of pressure be brought to bear to put amendments and changes into it, and would result in a distracting kind of hassle which wouldn't contribute to an ultimate solution. We ought to continue to work within the framework of 242.

POLITICKS: If a Geneva conference is convened, what should the Palestine Liberation Organization's role be?

BALL: I've never really understood the issue of the P.L.O., as the Israelis have put it forward. To try to get the P.L.O. to agree to support the continued existence of Israel as a condition for its participation in a conference is putting the emphasis in the wrong place. At the end of a conference, the P.L.O. could agree to it. Now, whether the P.L.O. should be represented at all or not seems to me to be a rather misplaced emphasis.

POLITICKS: So they should be there in some way?

BALL: It certainly doesn't bother me. I must say that to the extent the Israelis try to push this question front and center, they raise a fundamental issue: Does the current Israeli Government really want a settlement or does it want a continuation of the status quo, in the hope that sooner or later the world will accept the present situation and Israel can try to absorb the occupied territories on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Now, I'm putting this in very crude terms, but I think many Americans have this suspi-

cion and Israel ought to do everything possible to eliminate it

POLITICKS: Isn't it more than a suspicion?

BALL: Oh, I don't know. I really don't know what the plan of the Begin Government is. What they've done and said could lead one to draw this conclusion. But there are probably a variety of opinions on this within the present Government. Certainly, that's true within Israel itself. Many Israelis would very much like to see this matter settled and would be willing to go very much further than the Begin Government has so far indicated in trying to achieve a settlement.

POLITICKS: Do you really think that a government led by Menahem Begin and Moshe Dayan will ever seriously discuss the Palestinian state and total withdrawal from the occupied territory?

BALL: I don't know. Begin's background would suggest that he is committed to an expanded Israel which would include the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. He bases it on the Old Testament foundations, which seem to me to be rather curious because the Promised Land as defined in the Old Testament included quite a lot more than the West Bank. It included a substantial part of Jordan, and I am not quite sure that Begin would want to expand that far.

POLITICKS: Let me make sure I understand you. You're basically saying that there should be an overall settlement, which should be implemented over a period of months rather than years.

BALL: I would do it as fast as possible, because I think that phased withdrawal could be easily interrupted by rather peripheral events.

POLITICKS: I assume you're talking about approximately the '67 borders.

BALL: That's right. And Resolution 242.

POLITICKS: And you're also talking about a Palestinian state, which isn't in 242.

BALL: No, but when I say a Palestinian state, I'm talking about some homeland for the Palestinian people. I think there should be some act of self-determination on their part to determine what it is. If they wanted to become part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan again, that would be fine with me. I have no objection.

POLITICKS: In reality, we're talking about a small state, with at least a major role for the P.L.O. in its politics.

BALL: Quite roughly, I think so. I think so. But, look, the P.L.O. is everything and nothing. It's an umbrella for a great many different shades of opinion just as the Irgun and other organizations in Israel were before the creation of the state of Israel. And it's a more extreme form, an expression of the frustrations of any people who live under military occupation for a very long time.

POLITICKS: There are two parts of the settlement we haven't discussed—the nature of the relationship between the Arab states and Israel, and between the Palestinian state and Israel, and the nature of the guarantees that would be provided Israel and possibly Arab states for their security. What kind of a peace do you envision?

BALL: Israel is quite right in insisting on a peace that is far more than simply a