

Why Begin's drama is a fraudulent hit

LAST Wednesday, the Menachem Begin stage show opened in the executive office building next to the White House.

It was more a media event than a traditional Press conference. Actually, in the final analysis it was only Act I in a drama sure to be continued throughout the coming months.

While the Press hustled for standing room, seats were reserved for Israeli embassy officials, American Jewish leaders, and Israeli television crews who brought the entertainment live to viewers in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Begin was playing to the home audience by showing them his effectiveness with the Americans. The contrasts between Begin and the former leader, Yitzhak Rabin, were too glaring to need emphasis.

Mr. Begin slept through most of the hour-long affair, including the presentation of the much-trumpeted "plan."

Effusive

The show was locally directed by the Israeli embassy's personable Press counsellor Avi Pazner, but it had been largely produced in Israel by Dan Patir, Press counsellor to the Prime Minister who introduced Begin. Patir agreed to stay on the job at Begin's request, the same position he held for many years under Rabin.

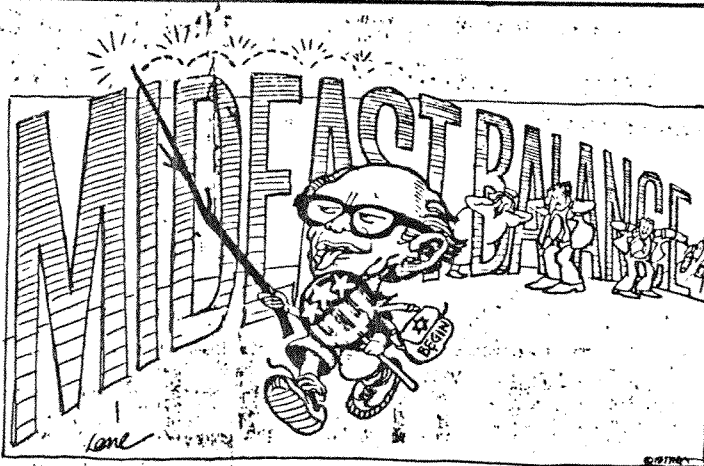
Somehow the substance of Begin's visit became nearly completely buried under the witty style of Israel's new Prime Minister.

American newspapers in general were filled with rather vacuous discussions of the amazing "rapport" established between Begin and Carter — something Carter encouraged by appearing to downgrade the importance of the actual issues and repeatedly tossing accolades at a grinning Begin together with an unexplained optimism about resumption of the stalled Geneva conference. Even more effusive was Vice-President Walter Mondale who



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By Mark A. Bruzonsky



New kid on the block

told the cheering thousands at an Israeli embassy reception just hours after the Press conference, "Relations between the U.S. and Israel have never been better."

"I've sat through all the talks with all the foreign leaders who visited our land, and none have gone better, none have been more personally, if I can say, joyous, than those between the President and the Prime Minister. If that weren't enough, Mondale added,

"Today (Begin) did something that no leader has ever done... He went to a news conference with the American news media and won."

There should be no doubt about the Begin triumph. His opening performance of what will become a travelling show of periodic additional acts was a public relations coup. First he captured the somewhat uneasy American Jewish community in a series of New York meetings and

then he went on to charm Washington's political and media circles. If Jimmy Carter himself was only acting, he was even superior to Begin.

How long Begin can use his charm and wit, coupled to his refurbished but discredited policies which he calls a "plan," to reverse the steady deterioration in U.S.-Israel relations of the past two or three years is one of Washington's great puzzles. Much will of course depend on how the various Arab parties react and on how the Carter Administration decides to attempt to go forward with its basic outline for a Middle East settlement which, so far, has not been substantially altered by Begin's remarkable political footwork.

What has been changed is timing. Carter must be much more cautious now, some might say devious. He has essentially allowed Begin to grab the baton

and it may be some time before Carter can fully regain the initiative.

As the *Washington Post* in its post-Begin-Press-conference editorial noted: "Mr Begin's purpose... was to induce the Administration to suspend its current active effort to gain Israeli and Arab assent to Mr Carter's three basic points: The return of Israeli-occupied territories; a Palestinian homeland; and real peace, which means normalisation of diplomatic, economic and cultural relations across the board." And this he did.

Guess

A hopeful guess is that Carter has decided he needs to play along with the Begin theatrical at least in the beginning. He knows he needs to protect himself from the American Jewish community's wrath, which he began to feel in June, and from charges he sabot-

aged Israeli efforts without giving the new government a chance.

At some point down the road, when the Begin "plan" is finally perceived as the hollow sham it really is, Carter will then be in a position to reassert his own overall framework for progress toward a settlement.

But by playing along at first Carter may not realise how difficult it will be to return to American assertiveness in any short time frame. Begin has probably accomplished, at minimum, three to four months further delay; maybe a year or more. It all depends on how the drama further unfolds as the other actors come on stage.

Serious diplomatic discussions of the real issues have yet to begin. Begin is well aware that his plan is little more than the old Likud policies dressed up in the flashy manner. No one doubted that Sinai and Golan were negotiable; though those Israeli settlements increasingly dotting the map make Israeli intentions suspect. Nor was there any secret that the Israelis were willing to discuss things with the Arabs in Geneva.

The only thing new, in any real sense, about Begin's charade is Israeli willingness for indirect or proximity talks. And this was apparently added only because Begin is well aware Geneva is not going to be reconvened under his framework and he wanted to have on the table, some additional talking points.

Geneva won't be reconvened until the Palestinian issue is properly addressed and until Israel indicates a credible willingness to discuss near-complete territorial withdrawal and a Palestinian homeland in exchange for a real peace and meaningful guarantees.

And these are the very issues which Begin, most cleverly, is not even going to talk about under the pretence that they are to be discussed, like everything else, at Geneva, but not before.