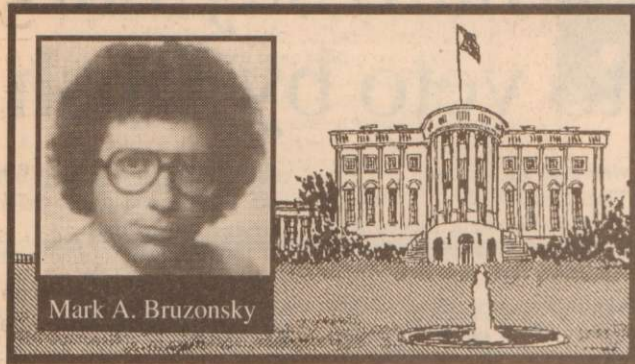


From



Washington

Peace process on hold

Bush administration on roll

HOW to help George Bush stay on at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue has been much on the international diplomatic agenda for many in the Middle East. Arab diplomats have their own concern.

More than anything else, in fact, it's this situation which best explains the various twists and turns of recent weeks in the so-called "Mid-East Peace Process" — an affair now not only dominated by the US but actually run right out of the State Department at foggy bottom both in fact as well as in venue.

At first there was all the hype about "the new" Yitzhak Rabin. Shortly after Rabin's election, he came calling and even stayed overnight with Bush up at Camp David. And in this election year Rabin then managed to get, not so surprisingly, all those billions in loan guarantees plus a lot more arms.

Then came optimistic noises in the press about a possible "historic" deal between Israel and Syria — noises that still linger. And talk continues about some kind of "autonomy" for the Palestinians with a resumption of talks expected later this month before the election.

All these diplomatic background noises have been designed, of course to leave an impression in the public mind that when it comes to the overall situation in the Middle East, and with Israel, the Bush administration is on a roll and should be kept around so it can continue its good work.

And this has come about because all of the major parties have a self-perceived interest in trying to help the Bush and Baker duo stay at the helm. Emphasis, though, should be on the adjective "self-perceived", for making a good case for Bush has always been far more problematical than still want to admit.

The Israelis, meanwhile, now lead by the seasoned but ever so duplicitous Yitzhak Rabin, have been hedging their bets and consequently are ready for whatever happens on November 3.

But it's even more than this. George Bush, and those around him in key positions, has been around American government and power in the "only remaining superpower" for a very long time. He's been director of the CIA, ambassador at the UN, vice-

president for eight years. He's a party man whose views and predilections — most especially when it comes to foreign affairs — are well-known.

In short, George Bush can be counted on to steer in a reliable manner in the same directions he has in the past — and that's what many powerful overseas leaders clearly want most of all.

Continuity, predictability and loyalty — these are all commodities very much desired by others in power around the world. And with both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot being unknown quantities in so far as trying to determine just what they would do in power as opposed to what they will say while running for office, it shouldn't be that much of a surprise that foreign leaders much prefer to stick with he whom they already know and trust.

Of course when it comes to matters Middle East, its quite clear that Clinton already has sold out to Jewish and Israeli interests while Bush has at least kept his distance — this even though in the Reagan/Bush years the American "strategic" partnership with Israel has been tremendously enhanced. So this too explains the apprehensions that have led many in the Middle East to conclude it's vital they do all they can to help Bush.

Additionally, of course, if Bush were to go, a whole new team of senior personnel would soon be coming to power, with a whole new series of bookroom pressures and deals hard to fathom in advance. And with Clinton's campaign so permeated by those with additional allegiances to Israel that the Arab parties want to see Bush stay in power isn't very hard to understand.

Even so, though, American political realities this election year are such that what's been done so far by various Arab parties vis-a-vis the "peace process" hasn't seemed to have much im-

pact on American attitudes towards the upcoming election. Whether some dramatic "break-through" awaits remains possible though probably unlikely.

As for the Israelis, Rabin is a shrewd, crafty, politico much more in the mould of David Ben Gurion than Menachem Begin. Ben Gurion was the master of saying one thing in public while doing another thing behind-the-scenes; whereas Begin's original Herut and it's successor the Likud prided themselves in wearing their intransigence on their sleeves.

So, in short, what Rabin's been up to is a lot more calculating than how Shamir handled things — but nevertheless he's still heading in the same basic directions of Palestinian negation and Israeli regional hegemony.

On the one hand Rabin himself has always had something of a preference for Republicans going way back to his own days in Washington as Israeli ambassador. This is well-known but usually overlooked or conveniently forgotten in the American Jewish community which traditionally has had a major liberal and Democratic component. Many within American Jewish power circles truly welcomed Labour's return to power; but for many others Shamir was perceived to be so bad that anyone else coming to power would have been cheered, even Rabin with his Republican and hard-line proclivities.

Whatever Rabin's personal preferences, though, as Israel's new prime minister he's been playing Israel's cards quite capably. By mending fences with Bush at a time when Bush can only be appreciative, the resuscitated Israeli premier will be able to credibly argue — should Bush pull it off and remain at the White House — that Bush owes him. Moreover, it would be pretty difficult for a newly elected Bush



George Bush

to disregard all that has just happened and suddenly turn on Rabin after the way things were handled in 1992.

Judged by substantive rather than rhetorical changes, though, Rabin hasn't actually delivered anything serious to the Palestinians; and what he's given to Bush and Baker has been far more lip service than serious policy changes. There have been a lot more smiles, an improved "atmosphere" at the "peace talks", and confused pledges about basic changes in the policy concerning settlements in the occupied territories which haven't actually been translated into deeds. But that's about it.

A few weeks ago it looked to many observers as if the Arab parties were going to try to accommodate Bush and Baker with some kind of diplomatic "October surprise" designed to give the administration a foreign policy success and a badly needed lift. It still could happen.

But more than likely it now seems, matters Middle East aren't going to play much of a role at all — except for the bad taste left by Saddam Hussein — in a campaign dominated by questions concerning the economy, jobs and the deficit. The "peace process" may really be "on hold" for the foreseeable future until the diplomatic dust finally does clear.

Mark A. Bruzonsky's syndicated "From Washington" column appears weekly in the Gazette. The writer can be reached at (202) 362-6033 and by fax to (202) 362-6965

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