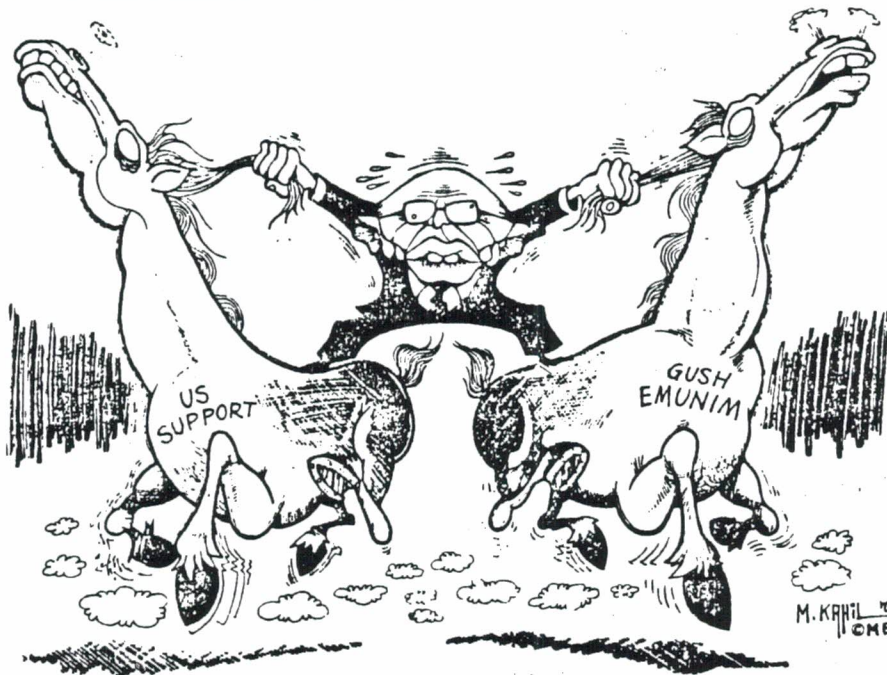


Middle East International



Presidential Politics: Pressures and Constraints

Electoral politics and the Iranian crisis have merged to produce a presidential campaign so far dominated, unexpectedly, by presidential initiatives. Mark Bruzonsky reports from Washington.

In times of national challenge, America reverts to being a presidential country. It is to the White House — not to Congress, wise commentators, academic experts, or religious leaders — that the nation turns its faith and focus.

Coupled with his own stumbling start, this unforeseen climate has seriously hampered Senator Edward Kennedy — the “alternative leadership” candidate who now trails Carter by 40 percent to 48 percent, according to a 9 December Gallup poll of Democratic voters.

“It staggers me,” one senior magazine editor recently observed

as he contemplated the reversal of Kennedy’s fortunes. “In 25 years of covering national politics I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” “Superman crashes” headlines the liberal-leaning *New Republic*, summing up Kennedy’s plight.

Kennedy’s forces predict, but with less than total conviction in their voices, that Carter’s resurgence will not outlast the release of the Tehran hostages or whatever the outcome of that wholly exceptional situation is to be. So far, as Republican contender John Connally notes, all that has happened is “an aberration” and Carter is enjoying a “second honeymoon” occasioned by a rally-round-the-flag patriotism provoked by the Ayatollah Khomeini. After Iran, Connally predicts with abundant confidence, “the spectre of inflation, tight money and lack of leadership” may cause Carter’s status to “fall as fast as it rose”.

Such forecasts are hardly taken as gospel though. Washington has become both dazzled and bewildered by the of late almost weekly changes of political complexion. Carter himself is said to be "tremendously uplifted", while his pollster, Pat Cadell, insists that the Iran situation only accelerated trends already evident in public opinion and thus will have a permanent impact on presidential politics.

Yet an ominous red flag for the White House is the bubbling public conviction that American forces must be unleashed. On the same day last week liberal columnist David Broder, conservative pundit William Safire and Establishment confidant James Reston all joined the chorus.

"There is a point at which a policy of patience will merge into a failure of will, and self-restraint will be perceived as a confession of impotence," Broder commented, adding, "there will have to be an increased deployment of American forces in the Persian Gulf region."

According to Safire, "our patience is viewed with dismay by our friends and with contempt by our enemies... we should be using this provocation to project US power into new Mideast bases."

"There must be some kind of new US military and political commitments from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean", Reston concluded. "The Ayatollah has made it possible for the United States to have a new policy for the defence of the Middle East...

[including] a more present and permanent American military presence...".

Indeed, the Iranian challenge coming in the midst of election politics has prompted what may come to be seen in retrospect as a basic redirection in America's strategic outlook.

Only a decade ago the "Nixon Doctrine" proclaimed the refusal to use American forces for regional foreign intervention. Instead, the US would maintain a system of surrogates, supplied with American military hardware, while making sure that American forces would provide at most a supportive role. The shah, of course, was a major pillar of this Kissingerian response to the Vietnam psychosis.

Today, Kissinger is leading the forces of military assertiveness while present-day office-holders, including Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, are being forced into the position of counselling restraint. Last week, for instance, Brown warned: "We need to be somewhat cautious to see that the pendulum doesn't swing back too far the other way to the point where we begin to believe that military strength can solve all our... problems."

Influenced by this widely felt desire for military resurgence, the Carter administration now finds itself recommending substantial additions to the defence budget (partly motivated by an attempt to save Salt II) and advocating a massive "rapid deployment force" — suggesting the projection of direct American power into future Middle

East situations. On 7 December a Pentagon delegation left for Saudi Arabia to discuss the use of Saudi bases for the RDF in times of crisis. Other countries where base rights might be sought are Egypt, Israel and Morocco.

This may be the end of America's "Vietnam syndrome", but what it is the beginning of is uncertain and beset with potential risks.

As for the presidential sweepstakes, the Republicans, with either Reagan or Connally at the helm, have a marvellous opportunity. They can portray themselves as offering decisive, forceful, nationalistic leadership at a time of serious public frustration and confusion.

If Kennedy and Carter should battle each other bloody before the definitive contest begins, the emerging national consensus may be ready to accept an extreme right-wing president for the first time in modern history.

As for the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire itself, the Carter people are hoping somehow to muddle through until November — then they might look at it afresh. As William Quandt wrote in his 1977 study, *Decade of Decisions*, Arab-Israeli policy "tends to fade into the background in election years. Such was the case in 1968, 1972 and 1976. Candidates and incumbents feel obliged to outbid each other in terms of their commitments to Israel. A few votes may be won this way, along with other forms of support, but, more importantly, no votes are lost." □