

Neumann: A New Approach

by Mark Bruzonsky

As the shape of President-elect Reagan's administration emerges, Mark Bruzonsky considers the position of one of Mr Reagan's senior advisers whose future remains in doubt.

Now that General Alexander Haig has been appointed to succeed Emund Muskie at the State Department, almost all Washington foreign policy analysts are gloomy about the Reagan administration's ability to deal effectively with the Palestinian issue, and so to restore America's weakened position in the seemingly endless search for an Arab-Israeli settlement. One former government official who has worked closely with Haig and supported his candidacy for Secretary of State candidly admits that, when it comes to Middle East affairs, Haig is unequivocally pro-Israeli and firmly opposed to Palestinian self-determination.

But Washington is a city of surface realities, which often mask far more complex processes and attitudes. And when it comes to the Arab-Israeli imbroglio, there is one senior Reagan adviser with Middle East experience who combines a rare sensitivity to the Palestinian predicament, political shrewdness and access to power.

His name is Robert G. Neumann and he is currently heading the Reagan transition programme at the State Department. And it is precisely because he combines these various qualifications that quiet but strenuous Israeli efforts are already under way to deny Neumann the post of assistant secretary for Near East and South Asian Affairs now held by Harold Saunders.

Neumann has been US ambassador in both Afghanistan and Morocco and earlier he taught international affairs at the University of California in Los Angeles. For the past few years he has been affiliated to Georgetown University's Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) where he became conspicuous after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since realising, however, that he was a candidate for a major foreign policy post in a Reagan administration, Ambassador Neumann has stopped talking in public about his views on the Palestinian problem and the Camp David 'peace process'. For some time now, he has been ambiguously using the phrase "Jordanian option" in a way apparently meant to divert attention from his thoughtful and balanced approach to the Palestinians, one which could cause him serious difficulties within the Reagan foreign policy camp.

But in an important yet relatively unnoticed article published by CSIS in the spring of 1979, Neumann quite openly expressed what close associates say are still his basic views. In spite of what was said during the campaign or what is publicly enunciated by often self-appointed Reagan spokesmen at the moment, Neumann's sensitive and reasonable ideas about finding a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement consistent with American interests could provide the incoming Reagan administration with a sound and coherent Middle East policy. The chances remain slim of course, and Neumann's position is still tenuous. Yet it is possible that Ambassador Neumann may become Reagan's most important adviser on Middle East affairs.

Writing after the Camp David accords but before the signing of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in March 1979, Neumann's article was one of the most serious

attempts to examine the Carter administration's policy. It was published in a special CSIS white paper under the title "The Middle East after Camp David: Perils and Opportunities" — and it particularly stressed a number of common misconceptions.

"Seriously flawed" was the phrase Neumann chose to characterise the Carter administration's basic approach to the scenario envisaged at Camp David. "The essence of American assumptions," Neumann wrote, "is that King Hussein wants to regain control over the West Bank and that the West Bank Palestinians realise or will soon realise that the return of Arab control is possible only in conjunction with Jordan, because Egypt, Israel and America do not want an independent Palestinian state." Yet, Neumann concluded, "the Palestinians dislike Jordanian overlordship almost as much as the Israeli one and are unlikely to be enthusiastic about coming back under Jordanian rule." "In other words," Neumann added for emphasis, "the Carter administration's central assumption... that King Hussein should have motivation, by logic and self-interest, to enter these negotiations, is fallacious. The opposite is true."

While writing with careful attention to the delicacy with which any establishment discussion must approach this explosive issue in the United States, Neumann made clear his conclusion that Palestinian nationalism has become an issue which cannot any longer be ignored except at great risk.

"The difference between Israelis and Arabs is not a difference between right and wrong," Neumann quoted Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, as saying, "but between right and right." "Just as the Jewish people, not just those living in the Palestinian region but in the diaspora, needed an Israel as a focus for their aspirations and pride as well as a rallying point in case of danger, so the Palestinian Arabs, not only those who remained in the same region, but those who dispersed into their diasporas, need a Palestinian homeland for similar reasons," wrote Neumann. Then he went on to quote approvingly former American Middle East trouble-shooter Alfred Atherton (now ambassador in Cairo) that it is "inescapably clear that a solution to the Palestinian problem is essential in reaching a lasting settlement" while adding his own caveat about Camp David that "any attempt to postpone or bypass the vital element will inevitably have negative results".

Neumann believes it is necessary for the creation of a Palestinian homeland to be linked to the normalisation of relations between Egypt and Israel, for Israel to return to the original intention of UN Resolution 242 — withdrawal from all the occupied territories — and for the PLO to accept 242's injunction that all states in the region are entitled to "secure and recognised boundaries free from threats or acts of force".

"If one wants peace, one has to talk with the people who carry guns... that means almost certainly... involvement, directly or indirectly, of the PLO" argued Neumann, pointing out that in Morocco, Algeria, Cyprus and Vietnam attempts were made to claim that the leading nationalist groups did not truly represent the population — attempts which all ended in costly failure. Like it or not, Neumann stressed in his article, "there is no way of getting to the

Mark Bruzonsky is a consultant on US Middle East policies and is associate editor of Worldview magazine.

inside the Reagan entourage belittle Churba's qualifications, but he is being pushed by others. Churba's latest book, *Retreat from Freedom* (see Middle East Books), was rushed into print through private publication a few months before the election, obviously in an attempt to propel the author into the government.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the incoming Reagan administration has neither the sensitivity nor the understanding to deal with Middle East affairs in a way which even pro-American governments would find palatable.

There may be an attempt to scare and coerce American allies — especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and also Jordan — into going along with American strategic designs. But it is unlikely that this "macro" and "macho" approach would succeed in lessening regional tensions or promoting basic American interests.

The US appears to be marching inexorably, as it did two decades ago in southeast Asia, towards some political and military confrontation in the Middle East theatre. The new cold warriors and the right-wing Zionist sympathisers seem too much in control to be deflected by reasoned debate. Their illusion of being able to solve American Middle East problems by military force and by attempts to restructure Middle East affairs in a way suitable for Israel can only be shattered by discrediting their assumptions and outlooks. Pressures and confrontation tactics will have to be a two-way street if Mr Reagan and his advisers are to understand the inadequacies of their current Middle East orientation.