

Real changes yet to come

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THERE'S a sense of relief and hope here, the relief quite justifiable but the hope far more difficult to grasp so clearly.

George Shultz and the Reagan Administration have finally, and with great reluctance, given in to the pressures of the Intifada, American public opinion, pleas from world leaders, and unusually competent PLO diplomacy. Make no doubt about it, it is the Americans who have this time changed their tune but only after trying all kinds of alternatives for many years now. No matter how much Shultz attempts to picture the changes as having come from the PLO, this time around the Americans blinked.

But the explosion of publicity surrounding Shultz's announcement on Wednesday evening is obfuscating that basic fact that what the Americans actually have given so far is rather little and all the extremely contentious issues that have made even dialogue between the Israeli political establishment, their American benefactors, and the PLO so excruciatingly difficult remain just as before.

So far all that is forthcoming from the Americans — in return for very substantial new articulations of PLO policy positions from Yasser Arafat, who is personally putting his own future on the line — is talks in Tunis between the American Ambassador and persons from the PLO. In reality, talks of various kinds using various intermediaries have been going on for some time now and not very much new is going to be learned just because Ambassador Pellatreau sits down with senior aides to Yasser Arafat.

The Americans spent years a few decades ago deciding on the shape of the table at the Paris Peace Talks about the Vietnam War. And more than a year ago now Shultz met the leader of the African National Congress, Oliver Tambo, right here in

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Washington, without much change in the actual predicament of Blacks in South Africa. Thus today's euphoria will probably soon dissolve into a more realistic appreciation that the future remains far, far more difficult than the past.

But nevertheless, a long journey must begin at some point even if the protagonists intend different outcomes. And the Americans are now positioning themselves in something other than total antipathy to the Palestinians just as the Russians have been cautiously courting a new relationship with the Israelis. A new Soviet-American initiative, like on October 1, 1977, could be in the offing.

Indeed, however, much scepticism remains warranted, today's political theatre is pregnant with possibilities — one can at least now imagine something other than mutual devastation for the Israelis and the Palestinians. For in taking this long-delayed steps of acknowledging that the Palestinians are represented by the PLO and that the issue of Palestinian nationalism is thus on the American agenda in one form or another, the symbols of diplomacy may be changing and that may eventually lead to the serious policy changes which are not as yet visible or even contemplated.

Of course, it is such policy changes which are what real political progress is all about. And even though a new administration is about to take charge in Washington, it should be obvious that the Bush-Baker team which will have charge of US foreign policy in but five weeks is actually a continuation of the circles of power that have been ruling this country for the past eight years. No major changes in Mid-east policy should be anticipated quickly, though a new style and rhetorical flourish are already becoming evident. Indeed, it has been learned here that among the major reasons for Shultz's about-face were pressures from the incoming administration to spare them having to take this cautious step.

For the Palestinians to get real control of their now occupied state far more than crafty verbal diplomacy is going to be required. The basic levers of power and pressure, including military capabilities, will have to be focused on by the PLO and the Arab world at the same time that the niceties of diplomatic dancing are engaged in. Indeed, if the "Intifada" subsides as a result of the events of the last 18-hours a major source of pressure will be released only playing into the hands of the Israeli and their American ally.

It was the youngsters of Palestine who made all this possible: and they will continue to have the primary role in making sure that the pressures which could conceivably be leading to a Palestinian state and a potential Israeli-Palestinian peace are not let up.