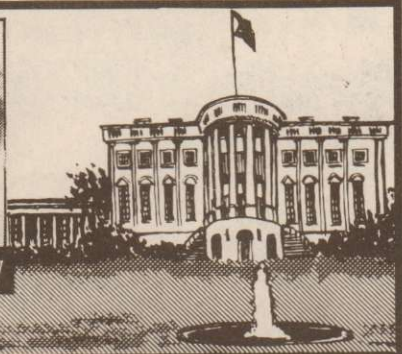


# From



Mark A. Bruzonsky



# Washington

'He has improved so much in person that I was shocked myself....His strength is getting obnoxious...and the worst part of all this is that he's going to be staying around as prime minister for a long time.'

SO concludes a very important, pro-PLO, senior American Jewish statesman who has personally known the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Shamir, for many decades after meeting with him during the recent Shamir tour of the US.

More and more the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is coming down to a test of wills and capabilities between two mortal giants, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Shamir. In some ways this struggle can be compared to a 15-round heavyweight boxing match between these two individuals, both very short in actual height, yet both gargantuan by political standards.

The boxing match can be thought of as beginning last November in Algiers with the revolutionary Palestine National Council meeting. That meeting was like the bell announcing the beginning of the fight. It not only allowed Arafat to take specific steps to formally recognise Israel and clearly enunciate the offer of a two-state solution to Israel. It also started a kind of clock of moderate credibility ticking for what can be thought of as the entire conservative wing of the PLO.

If and when that clock winds down Arafat could finally find himself forced out or else be compelled by the internal dynamics within the PLO to retrench his exceedingly compromising positions.

Round 1, fought out mostly during December and January, went to Arafat on points. For those of you unfamiliar with the specifics of boxing, if there isn't a knockout the judges decide the winner based on "points" awarded to each boxer during each round. If both fighters are still standing at the end of the fifteen 3-minute rounds the judges tally the "points" and determine a victor.

Arafat not only manoeuvred the PNC with a virtuoso performance. He then capitalised on George Shultz's petulant refusal to even allow him to come to address the United Nations in New York by capturing the spotlight of world attention in Geneva as few have ever done before. Then Arafat deftly manoeuvred for weeks, finally feeling compelled to threaten his own resignation, all in order to get Washington to reverse course and at least begin a "dialogue" with the PLO. After that Arafat orchestrated recognition for the embryonic state of Palestine all around the world from more countries than recognise Israel.

But image and reality have not been fully in conformity for Arafat's Fatah-dominated PLO. The declaration of statehood, even with recognition in so many world capitals, hasn't really taken hold either practically or psychologically. Little has changed on the ground in the occupied territories, even though the spirit of the Intifada remains emboldened. Even with Arafat's elevation to president the PLO's reality remains pretty much what it was before — an exile group of Palestinians supported in many, but certainly not all, parts of the Arab World and having to capitalise on the rejuvenation of the Palestinian cause made possible by the Intifada and the largesse of a few conservative Arab states.

Round one was a tough one for Shamir, possibly caught off balance a bit by Arafat's energy and boldness, and preoccupied at the time with internal Israeli politics. He was pushed to the ropes more than once giving the impression he wasn't really up to the new challenge. Cartoonists around the world portrayed him as totally obstinate and completely intransigent. His terrorist past came

# Round Two goes to Shamir

back into print. A few Jews in Israel and abroad began to challenge him directly as if he personally was the barrier to peace with the Palestinians.

But Shamir now has shown that he truly was all along understudy for Menachem Begin. His American performance in some ways has outdone Begin's similar act back in 1977 when Begin managed to thrust forward the concept of autonomy for the Palestinians at a major press conference held in the Old Executive Office Building after meeting with an American President Jimmy Carter, who had declared himself in favour of a "Palestinian homeland."

Autonomy thereby dominated discussion for years, pushing the idea of an international peace conference, so much under discussion in 1976 and 1977 as it has been of late, far into backdrop.

This time, more than a decade after Begin managed a similar feat but under far less difficult circumstances, Shamir has managed to neutralise much of the internal Jewish pressures, to craft American policies quite acceptable to the Israelis though at times a bit rhetorically out of step, and to throw both the Israeli opposition as well as his primary opponent, Arafat, onto the defensive.

To the American eye and ear, both Shamir's demeanour and his words, were carefully fine-tuned for maximum resonance and appeal — calmness, smiles, low-key language. Even columnists like Anthony Lewis have got themselves entangled in Shamir's web writing pleas to the PLO not to reject the possibility of elections.

Shamir may be the same obstinate uncompromising zealot as so many of us think him to be, but he's now begun to master the art of public manipulation — no doubt with excellent coaching from Henry Kissinger and expensive PR gurus.

After leading us to believe we could

all count on him to continue shooting himself in the feet, at least in respect to world public opinion, Shamir has emerged into his own this latest visit to Washington.

This is what the prominent American Jewish leader quoted at the beginning of this column meant when he said that "his strength is getting obnoxious." He went on to say that not only is he likely to remain PM for some time but that "he'll lick the hell out of anybody from Labour which has no leadership now."

Asked about Bush, this same personality who has served in high posts in Washington under many presidents, sadly concludes: "Forget it! There's nothing in Washington today to count on. I'm disappointed in Bush completely!"

So Round Two definitely goes to Shamir.

Round Three is likely to be fought around Arafat's response to the Shamir "elections" ploy; and at this point the prospects for an Arafat comeback seem most uncertain.

If Arafat rejects Shamir's illusory "initiative" totally, correctly assessing that it is not a serious but rather a tactical public relations proposal, Arafat risks both losing the initiative and giving the appearance of not even being willing to try something that maybe, possibly, conceivably, just might somehow lead somewhere.

Yet if Arafat begins to dance in any way to Shamir's tune he risks entangling himself in a rather hollow, open-ended, draining process that could be drawn out for many months, maybe even years, all the while offering the Israelis more time to squeeze the life out of the Intifada and further entrench themselves in the occupied territories.

Either way Shamir scores more points. For neither of these options is a very good one for the PLO.

Soon we'll see if Arafat begins Round Three with something new of his own that can regain the initiative now seized by Shamir, or if we'll all look back a few years from now and remember that after a pretty good start at the opening bell Arafat quickly weakened in the second round and never fully recovered.

Richard Nixon got himself elected to his second term as president on the false slogan "Peace is at hand".

Peace isn't even close to being at hand in the Holy Land, but Yitzhak Shamir has just proved, once again, that a concentration on public relations and a shrewdness in playing upon most people's false hopes can often be an important substitute for real policies.

How is Yasser Arafat going to fight back now?

