

THE capital is all abuzz right now with the scandal involving Mayor Marion Barry, lured as he was by an old flame, a gorgeous former cover girl who a few years ago worked with the prestigious Willemena Modelling Agency in New York.

Somehow enticed by the FBI to pay a visit to Washington from California and seduce the Mayor over to her hotel room for drugs, the self-proclaimed "invincible" Marion Barry may have finally done himself in. He had become too visible, too suspect, too cocky; and the authorities finally got him after a chase that spanned most of the past decade and many millions.

But just before the Barry scandal took charge here, the previous talk of the town is likely to have far more lasting ramifications on our world.

The Senate Minority Leader, Bob Dole of Kansas, came out of the political closet and sent a cautious warning shot across Israel's broad bow.

By simply raising in public the issue of American aid to Israel, even in such a careful way, the Bush administration is letting Israel know that we live in a changing world and that co-operation with Washington has its advantages.

For at least the public manifestation of Bob Dole's concerns was indeed quite cautious. He spoke only of a 5 percent cut, and not just to Israel, but to the top five American recipients who together get about three-quarters of America's largesse. Furthermore, he linked it all to the need to support other countries in Eastern Europe and Central America rather than to anything relating to Israeli policies.

There's already been a lot of hype and commentary about Bob Dole's rather obvious suggestion that as our world wreathes with unexpected changes, there are some new countries that need and deserve American support and involvement. But while there should be no doubt that while Dole has raised to much greater public visibility the huge American subsidy to Israel, no one should be expecting any major convulsion in the US-Israeli alliance in the immediate future.

Rather, what is really involved at this point is an ongoing process of political bargaining and pressure between the political leaders in Washington and those in occupied Jerusalem. For George Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker want something from Israel right now. And thus Bob Dole's message about American economic and military aid should be understood to be more a slap on the back to a close friend with the aim of achieving better co-operation rather than the potential dagger some have depicted.

On the one hand it is true that American priorities need to be adjusted in view of the great needs and expectations in both Eastern Europe and Central America. In this sense — with over 20 percent of American aid earmarked for Israel, another 15 percent for Egypt, and most of the rest specifically designated for Pakistan, Turkey, Greece, and the Philippines — there's little presidential flexibility for shifting American resources.

There have been two big headline stories — one about a man, another about American foreign assistance to Israel. If I were a leader in Israel, I would not so quickly dismiss those who might suggest that the two major Washington stories are totally unrelated. What has happened to Marion Barry — a man — could happen as well to Israel — the nation — if Israel's leaders persist with the reckless hubris that both they and Barry have shared for some time.

A shot across Israel's bow?

But the Republican administration didn't have to raise these issues in the context it did; and the Israelis are very well aware of that. At the end of the day, all Senator Dole suggested was a rather piddling shift of some 5 percent, which in the case of Israel and Egypt would be less than \$300 million. Surely the American empire, along with its allies in Europe and Japan is still in a position to increase the foreign assistance pie in such amounts if it really wants to.

And one of the strongmen in the House, Congressman Lee Hamilton, suggested just this when he appeared on *Cable News Network* a few days ago saying "you can achieve the same purpose in a lot of ways" including changes in the defence budget.

"We've got to find new resources or re-allocate our resources if we're going to continue to be a world leader," Hamilton agreed. But his approach, which reflects the strategy of many in the Democratic Party, is not to push Israel into the centre of this hoping the Republicans will stumble and burn themselves with such a key constituency comprising Israel's multitudinous supporters.

Some Democrats are already salivating at the possibility that the Republicans will get into an antagonistic tussle with Israel's friends and that they, the Democrats, might then be able to regain some of Israel's many supporters who have drained away towards the Republicans during the Reagan 1980s.

And that's just the point. Clearly it was decided at the highest levels of official Republican Washington that it would be useful right now to make another point at the same time as that concerning the need to add some new nations to the list of major American aid recipients.

And this additional point relates to the situation in the Mid-east, the situation brought about because of haemorrhaging of support for Israel. For the ongoing Intifada, coupled with the style and tactics of Israel's Likud leaders, has indeed affected perceptions about Israel in the US. In a sense, the ice under Israel's

feet is no longer as thick as it has been used to in recent times.

For quite some time now there's been an under-the-table discussion here that so long as America continued to finance Israeli expansion and belligerence with ever-greater amounts of money the Israelis would not feel any serious pressure to give up their dreams of "greater Israel". But fear of the power of the Jewish lobby here has kept this debate to academic journals and cause groups; and kept it out of normal politics.

Now, as the Congress reconvenes and Israeli-Arab relations seem stalemated, the timing for changing this situation a bit was propitious. Baker, and Bush as well, are increasingly frustrated by an Israel that they can't quite get to play the game by Washington's rules. It's not that Washington wants a Palestinian State or is getting ready to seriously put great and sustained pressure on Israel. Israel's political strength here remains far too strong and the administration is far too permeated with Israeli supporters in key positions throughout the foreign policy establishment.

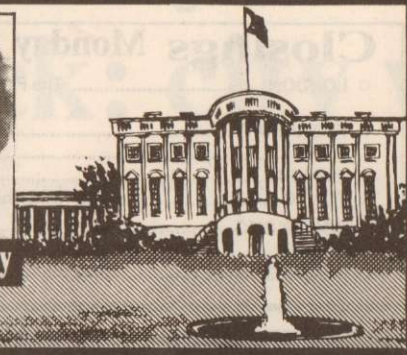


Barry who faces narcotics charges leaves US District Court in Washington.

From



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Washington

Rather, there is a desire right now to convince the Israelis to be more flexible and less obnoxious in the area of political theatrics. As far as the Bush administration is concerned a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue isn't likely anything soon. But that doesn't mean the situation has to be flaunted and that Washington has to pay the price of constant political tensions at the behest of Israel.

What Bush's team is seeking at this point is simply a more publicly compliant Israel. But the problem here is that the American view of good politics has a different matrix back in Israel; and what is seen as tactical flexibility in Washington is considered to be compromise and weakness in occupied Jerusalem. While Washington is controlled by the pragmatic elements of the Republican Party, Israel is increasingly singing to the tune of the more intransigent and fascist elements within Zionism.

So what's really involved behind the headlines is a very complicated game of pressure and counter-pressure, a testing of the political winds in both Washington and occupied Jerusalem.

Furthermore, there's an ongoing attempt by both the Americans and the Israelis to minimise both domestic and international political pressures by giving the impression that there is actually a serious peace process underway, though in reality the situation is pretty much stuck.

For Washington this means little more right now than getting some talks going between Israel and some Palestinians — quite literally talks for the sake of talks.

The Egyptians, of course, are desperately pushing for this as well for reasons of their own credibility.

And many of the pro-Israeli politicians here believe that for Israel's own good it would be wise for Shamir to show more "flexibility" at this point.

There's little thought in the Bush administration, however, to forcing Israel to accept a Palestinian State. Rather far shorter term political goals are at issue.

Now, after Dole's broadside, the ball is back in Israel's court. The foreign ministers talks between Israel, Egypt and the US that were to be held this month remain unscheduled. Shamir's "elections" ploy is buying time as designed, but it's also creating heightened tensions and anxiety.

Yasser Arafat, meanwhile, is once again showing signs of unease, publicly threatening

once more to convene the Palestine National Council. This time, he warns, he might tell the PNC that he hasn't been able to make the progress he promised. And he might even offer his resignation at a time when he is more likely to receive another lease on life than to be replaced.

The Israelis I suspect are now becoming more aware just how dangerous a game this all might turn out to be. Even if the Bush administration isn't ready to force on them the Palestinian State they have so long resisted; just by encouraging a debate about the power of the Jewish lobby and cutting aid to Israel, it's quite possible that more forces of reassessment will be unleashed within the American society and American politics.

Hence the serious desire by the Israeli leaders to quickly attempt to smother or sidetrack this kind of debate as they are aware that if it continues the American administration will be able to use it against them as leverage.

Yet Israel has earned many enemies in recent years. And the Jewish lobby is not nearly as invulnerable as it pretends to be. The message to Israel is thus a very complicated but also a very serious one. George Bush and his team seem to be saying to the Israelis it's time for you to co-operate a bit more with us than you have and to present your case in a better way; for otherwise we too are capable of political manipulations to try to get things our way and to make life more difficult for you rather than us.

So there have been two big headline stories here in the past few weeks — one about a man, another about American foreign assistance to Israel.

Mayor Barry is but one man who became too sure of himself, too cocky. One day he was on top about to announce his candidacy again even with all the controversy that has swirled around him for years. Quite literally just a few hours later Barry was on the ropes fighting for his very political existence.

Israel is a small nation that may have become too sure of itself, too pushy in its dealings with others, too collectively cocky if you will...too arrogant to use the term that has been coming up for many years now. Israel remains on top today and the resources it can still count on to stay there are considerable.

But if I were a leader in Israel I would not so quickly dismiss those who might suggest that the two major Washington stories of the past few weeks are totally unrelated. What has happened to Marion Barry, a man, could happen as well to Israel, the nation, if Israel's leaders persist with the reckless hubris that both they and Barry have shared for some time.