

FROM



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Everybody Wants To Be President

Washington - 12 February -- If there are still those who think that George Bush's Washington is going to do something dramatic in the Middle East to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian peace, such illusions should have faded by now.

Washington is preoccupied with lots of other issues and problems. Getting involved in a bitter fight with Israel and her Jewish minions here at home is not anyone's idea of good sense politics.

Says one astute Washington player who served in a high White House job back in the early years of the Reagan Administration, "When you told me six months ago that the Bush Administration and the Israelis were really in bed together and just playing delaying games and using Shamir's 'elections plan' in a deceptive way, I really thought you were wrong and that the new Bush Administration was serious. But now I think you are right. This Administration is just as bad, even worse in some ways, than the last one when it comes to Israel and the Palestinians."

Most of the rest of the reasons the PLO's "Washington strategy" isn't likely to succeed were outlined by Noam Chomsky in my lengthy three-part interview with him that was recently published in this publication.

But there are other important reasons as well. First of all, at least it is the impression here, the Israelis have managed to contain the Intifada. What that means in practice is that dramatic pictures aren't on the evening news and the Intifada has faded as an issue that has to be responded to with other than platitudes. In this crucial sense the Palestinians failed to cash in when they were on top and now it's a bit late in the day.

Another reason is that the Israelis have

managed -- with American complicity and PLO confusion -- to twist the public debate to one of "election plans" rather than one of Palestinian independence. Most Americans are so bewildered by all the points and counterpoints that they've gone on to think about other things -- just what the Israelis had in mind by playing their cards as they have.

Begin did the same thing a decade ago by coming forward with the "autonomy" concept in the months after President Carter expounded the need for "a Palestinian homeland" -- and in the end this propelled a basic change in Carter Administration policy toward a separate peace with Egypt. The debate was switched from "homeland", Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and international conference to "autonomy", "West Bank elections", and multi-year schemes that were purposely designed to lead nowhere.

In the aftermath of Yasser Arafat's bold bid for a place at the negotiating table, Shamir and Rabin have used the same basic tactic of "shifting the debate". Whereas Begin used "autonomy" for this purpose, now the Israelis have come forward with the notion of "elections", and more recently of "Cairo talks" and "a Washington Foreign Ministers meeting."

It's all a ploy, of course, to buy time to crush the Intifada, to regain the diplomatic initiative, and to hope that circumstances will change along the way.

And all this has been done, and is being done, in coordination with Bush's Washington -- don't believe anything else. And then the Israelis have craftily used Washington's leverage on Egypt to get the Mubarak government to push Arafat's PLO further into

this trojan horse process.

Still another reason that little serious effort should now be expected from the Bush Administration is that the vast panoply of pro-Palestinian groups in the U.S. are themselves confused and divided; so much so that nobody is seriously speaking out in a way that's really being heard here.

When most of these groups got together on December 31st, for instance, to sponsor a demonstration supposed to be in solidarity with the large "Time For Peace" demonstration in Jerusalem, they only managed to bring out an embarrassingly small group of people -- a few hundred at most. It was a perfect sign of the general incompetence and impotence that has come to characterize the multitude of small and often self-serving pro-Palestinian groups in this country.

When it comes to the Jewish peace movement, the situation is not much better. In general, the Jewish groups have been largely coopted by Peace Now and their American friends whose basic strategy is to show a smiley Israeli face and then make sure that American Jews are kept on board come what may. This is achieved by putting forward rather cheap and easy slogans -- "mutual recognition," "negotiations now", "1990: Time For Peace," "Two-State solution" -- while insisting on refusing to get involved with key and basic issues -- money, mass demonstrations, civil disobedience.

One perfect example of this situation is a new group calling itself the "Jewish Peace Lobby" and headed by Jerome Segal. Said to be organized as a counter to the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the reality is that this group is being pushed forward -- by elements within Peace Now, the left-wing of the