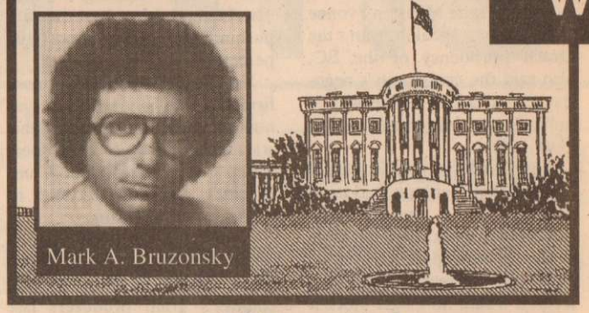

Washington

Is it just possible, that all the hoopla of US-Israeli confrontation of recent days is more orchestrated than actual, more political theatrics than serious schism. The US-Israeli marriage is not really on the rocks but just undergoing a mid-age adjustment; that there's now room for a bit of Washington moonlighting even while Israel remains fully confident that each evening, even if sometimes the clock stretches into the early morning hours, long-time partner America can be counted on to come home to its own bed

SUSPICION

ADMITTEDLY, this isn't a very popular line of thought these days -- especially not in the establishment press.

And yet lurking deep such thoughts, thoughts suspicions, seem in a way omnipresent. And someone should try to articulate this situation.

Is it possible, just possible, that the spat we are witnessing these days between Washington and Tel Aviv is more for the benefit of the relatives and other suitors than for real?

The verdict on this won't be in for some time, maybe many years. And even then the situation may be so politically convoluted -- maybe polluted as well -- that even key analysts will be confused by what has happened. Remember Camp David? Just mention the two words -- for the term itself has taken on a historical life of its own.

And so, is it possible, just possible, that the long-time US-Israeli marriage is not really on the rocks but just undergoing a mid-age adjustment; that there's now room for a bit of Washington moonlighting even while Israel remains fully confident that each evening, even if sometimes the clock stretches into the early morning hours, long-time partner America can be counted on to come home to its own bed.

Is it possible, just possible, that all the hoopla of US-Israeli confrontation of recent days is more orchestrated than actual, more political theatrics than serious schism, and that much of what's going on is really designed to woe the Arab parties so that they'll do what the married parties, designing strategies together as well as on their own, in the end want them to do?

To ask the basic question more colourfully, are we maybe witnessing on the big international stage a kind of *Dallas*-style plot with Washington playing a cunning J R role and Israel holding a few things up its sleeves should J R get too rambunctious?

If so, Syria would have to be likened to another of the barons plotting against J R even while taking him to lunch at the Cattleman's Club. And the closest analogy for the Palestinians negotiators, primarily drawn from the ranks of the Fatah, would probably be brother Bobby -- the "good" but rather naive brother who over time catches on more and more. Others, though, might think the proper analogy for the Palestinian negotiators to be Miss Ellie.

But why such questions, first of all? Is George Bush not to be trusted? Can't we accept the daily reportorial episodes in our big papers? Do we always have to be sceptical of those in power who claim to be leading us forward to a brave new world?

The short answer -- and one wisely always to be kept in mind -- is that especially on matters relating to Israel and American-Western involvement in the Mid-east hardly any amount of suspicion and scepticism is unwarranted. The historical record is a far better guide than daily statements of politicians now exercising power -- and the historical record is damning.

Add to this short answer the reality that George Bush has brought the art of political theatre to new heights of sophistication.

Indeed, political theatre is for Bush a way of governing that Ronald Reagan championed but he, Bush, has perfected. In Reagan's case it was simply that acting was all he could do. Yet who would have believed back in 1980 before Reagan had proved it plausible that a president could act his way through eight years and emerge victorious!

Bush on the other hand is a true presidential president, a hands-on president. Nevertheless he clearly learned much as Reagan's understudy. And in a sense Jim Baker, a man with enormous ambition, is Bush's understudy simply having to find some way to eclipse Dan Quayle.

President Bush has thus merged the Reagan style of performing to the cameras with the actual attributes of presidential power which Bush quite uniquely prepared himself to wield for many decades.

In this kind of a world, we've all become rather too gullible in recent years; we've all grown a bit too complacent accepting the slogans of the day and the cute phrases of the politicians of the moment; we've all got a bit too lazy in not going back and examining inconsistencies of the past, deceptions of the moment, and lies that interlace today's art of governing.

Any serious historical examination of the complexities that today surround international high-politics -- mostly especially in relationship to matters Mid-eastern -- would lead one to conclude that cover-up, distortion, and obfuscation have been by far the rule rather than the exception.

And thus it's likely that the current "peace process" is no exception. Even the term itself is purposefully designed to mask the real American role in the Mid-east and the basic realities of tension and even potential war preparations that are still going on between Israel and some Arab states.

For at the end of the day -- everything said and done and analysed -- there's something just a bit too convenient, just a bit too timely, about all this tango between the US and Israel erupting, as if one schedule, right at the very historical moment that a major international peace conference is supposed to be launched, right in advance of the need for maximum American pressures on Arab regimes and on the Palestinians to swallow hard and offer up basic historic concessions that will make possible the kind of peace conference the Americans have been nagging forward.

With such suspicious timing, a basic question becomes how should this supposed schism between the US and Israel be viewed by those hopeful that it might be for real -- or thinking that maybe it can be made to be real -- but sceptical in view of the realities of history and the realities of the American-Israeli marriage.

Whatever the real deep hidden truths about this situation -- and these understandably are known to very few who are not likely to tell -- there are tangible political realities that point to the possibility, even the likelihood, that a gigantic historical deception could be underway.

Those of us not privy to the inner sanctums of governing have to try to figure out this puzzling situation by examining history, by reasoning things through, and by hypothesising about what the parties are really up to rather than what they are saying; adjusting of course as we go and more insights become available.

The old adage, judge by one's actions rather than one's words should of course be the guiding one in these circumstances. And while the Bush-Baker words have got better; actions remain far behind and usually contradictory.

We do know the following:

❒ Israel and the US have cooperated in all kinds of deals and tricks for decades. There's even evidence that the US directly though clandestinely intervened to help Israel win the 1967 war and take over what we today call the occupied territories.

❒ Israel manipulated the US during the years of the Iran-Iraq war to keep the two parties at each other's throats, prevent any victor, and drain the resources and strength of both sides.

❒ Israel was the primary party that pushed the US into destroying Iraq, and the biggest winner in the region.

❒ The American and the Israeli power structures are known to be intertwined -- and right at the heart of the Bush administration are key Israeli-oriented personalities -- long-time Kissinger proteges to boot -- Brent Scowcroft and Larry Eagleburger. Indeed, the smell of Kissingerian manipulation behind-the-scenes is everywhere.

Add a few further educated guesses and speculations along the following lines:

❒ Both the US and Israel are well aware that the projected international peace conference bears little resemblance to the one long-discussed -- and about that the Israelis must be thrilled, no matter what they say in public.

❒ This "international conference" is to be under American dominance and geared to American priorities -- not under United Nations auspices with the panoply of Security Council resolutions since 1967 in the forefront. This is, of course, the kind of conference the Israelis have always wanted.

❒ This "international conference" is going to take place with both Israel and the US pledged to push the international aspects aside right after the opening speeches and stress the bilateral aspects of country-to-country diplomacy -- something the Israelis have always wanted.

❒ This "international conference" will not have participation by the Palestine Liberation Organisation -- thanks to the US accepting Israel's rather absurd restrictions on Palestinian representation. Instead Palestinians said not to be affiliated with the PLO and "approved" by Israel are going to be at the table; and even they may not be there on their own but in tandem with a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

❒ Indeed, this upcoming conference won't even be discussing a Palestinian State -- something the Palestinians said they had established some years ago at a previous Palestine National Council meeting. Instead, the Israelis are insisting that when it comes to the heart of the matter, "the Palestinian issue", what they want to discuss again and ad nauseum is "autonomy". And there definition of "autonomy" is that while the individual Palestinians have rights, the territories in which they live and their desire for national sovereignty are out of bounds. Again, of course, this is something the Israelis have always wanted.

So the realities of the moment are simply that the kind of projected international peace conference the Americans have so conveniently arranged for the Israelis in the wake of Iraq's destruction is nearly totally weighted in Israel's favour.

This is a summary of the reality of today's situation; rather than the rhetoric.

Indeed, it's difficult to believe that just a few years ago the Israelis could have even dreamed up such a deal for themselves as the kind of conference the Americans are now pushing with Soviet acquiescence and with European and United Nations encouragement.

It is a conference at which the Arabs are going to be pushed and cajoled to "recognise" Israel's legitimacy -- their key bargaining chip -- and to accordingly end the boycott of Israel, a boycott which in fact symbolises Arab unacceptance of Israel. After the opening session the Arabs are going to be pushed into bilateral negotiations and bilateral deals with Israel -- at least this is what the Americans seem to have in mind.

Israel, it seems, at maximum according to the United States's positioning of the terms of the conference, is going to be asked to freeze the settlements in the occupied territories -- but not to stop "expanding" current ones or reverse its policies that have already brought more than 50 percent of the areas and the great bulk of the natural resources illegally under Jewish dominance.

Indeed, contrary to Yitzhak Shamir's bombast, this is a concession the Israelis are prepared to make as both the money and the people to settle still more settlements aren't in short supply anyway -- the basic question is how much the Israelis will get from taking this step. George Bush knows he can get this "concession" in one way or another -- that's precisely why he's emphasising it.

At maximum, it seems, the Israelis are going to be pressed on the "autonomy" approach to the "Palestinian problem"; an approach that has already cost the Palestinians a generation of heartache and made it possible for the Jews to infiltrate the occupied Palestinian territories practically to the point of no return.

And so, faced with this overall situation, is it really too big a leap to imagine that both Tel Aviv and Washington have conspired to bring about some tension between the two long-time partners knowing this would be needed to both convince and "entice" the Arabs; that a bit of tension giving the impression that this upcoming conference isn't really so lopsided is imperative; that a grand built-up to another temporary settlement "freeze" had to be choreographed?

It's all a bit suspicious, isn't it? ❒❒