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Obstacle to peace

THE FASCINATING aspect of Secretary of State George Shultz's Sunday statement that Jews have a right to live on the "West Bank" was the reaction of the media representatives. They voiced the assumption that the statement reflected a new departure in U.S. policy.

They may, however, be excused for their error. Three years is a long time, and it is three years since Ronald Reagan, then a candidate for presidency, proclaimed his view that the "settlements" were legal.

Set in contrast to the campaign of unbridled propaganda by the Carter administration that the settlements were illegal, Reagan's statement (one of the many statements supportive of Israel he made during his election campaign) was greeted with due satisfaction by all the friends of Israel. It did Reagan no harm at all on election day.

But in the State Department, whose anti-Israel practitioners were thus deprived of one of the central subjects in their denigration of Israel, there was much gnashing of teeth.

When, with the accession of the Weinberger group as the dominating influence in the Reagan administration, the elimination or side-tracking of the pro-Israel personalities who had helped Reagan in his elections, and the increasingly hostile content of the administration's acts and statements, the legality of the settlements was seldom mentioned.

It was indeed referred to in the letter Reagan sent to Prime Minister Menachem Begin when he announced his "plan" – but was hardly noticed in the context of Reagan's demand that Israel "freeze" the establishment of settlements.

Now, with presidential aspirants for 1984 firing the first shots in preparation for the contest, it is not inappropriate, from Reagan's point of view, to introduce the friendly note on the settlements once again into his own election repertoire.

It is for Israel indeed a helpful note. In the unending war of propaganda with which Israel has to contend, it will at least not have to battle with Washington on the legality of Jews going to live in the heart of the Jewish homeland.

No change, however, has occurred in the Americans' other assertion on the settlements: that they are an "obstacle to peace." Indeed, the idea was repeated in that very address by Secretary Shultz last Sunday and for some time before that hardly a day passed without some member of the administration admonishing Israel for its establishing settlements.

Both Vice President George Bush and President Reagan himself were reported to have pressed this view on Defence Minister Moshe Arens during his recent visit to Washington. Bush was reported on Israeli Radio even to have said aggressively that nobody could be persuaded to understand why Israel continued to set up settlements.

In none of the reports was there a hint of a reply, by the Israeli representative to whom these reproaches were addressed.

While U.S. leaders, from the president down, never miss an opportunity to decry the settlement policy through the media, and thus implant ever more firmly in the public mind that it is "an obstacle to peace," Israeli spokesmen do not both to reply – certainly not to counter-attack.

This is an ongoing blunder, one of the many built in to Israel's information policy.

THE DEMAND that Israel stop putting up settlements – and forbid individual Jews to settle in the heart of Eretz Israel – is of course a function of the Arabs' central purpose, broadly supported by the U.S., that Israel give up Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip district and withdraw into the 1949 Armistice Lines.

Now these Americans who claim that the withdrawal will bring peace and who wish to be taken seriously should not be permitted to evade the pertinent questions that arise: on what grounds do they rest their assertion that shrinking Israel will bring peace?

The one rational source for it could be that of previous experience. Israel's experience, however, has taught a precisely contrary lesson.

Originally many Jews shared the illusion that concessions of territory would win the Arabs' heart and bring peace. That was why the Zionist leaders of 1947 accepted the partition plan of the United Nations. They were prepared to accept a grotesquely vulnerable sliver of territory, smaller than that within the 1949 Armistice Lines. The Arab reply was war – accompanied by a graphic statement of their intention towards that minuscule state and its Jews.

“The world will now see,” said Azzan Pashra, Secretary-General of the Arab League, “a war of extermination and momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusaders.”

After that war and the establishment of the Armistice Lines, there were still not Jews in Judea and Samaria (ruled by Jordan) and Gaza (in Egyptian hands).

In spite of its bitter experience, Israel, in the period between 1949 and 1967, again proposed peace on these territorial terms. The Arabs' answer was – war in every sphere except the battlefield: economic, diplomatic, propaganda, punctuated by terrorist forays across the borders and, in the north, by persistent Syrian shelling from the Golan Heights of Israel's villages.

Then came the Arabs' second major attempt on Israel's life – the Six Day War – and Jordan attacked Israel once more from Judea and Samaria.

What is there then in the 1948 and 1967 experience to justify the American claim that precisely a return to the *status quo* of June 5, 1967 – returning Judea and Samaria to Arab hands – will bring peace?

No less significant is the fact that in 1973, when Israel was in dire straits on both southern and northern fronts, Jordan refrained from entering the war and creating a third front against Israel. Even with Israel so hard-pressed, King Hussein was not prepared to hazard a contest with Israel for the west bank of the river (where a number of Israeli settlements flourish) and, perhaps still less, for the Samaritan and Judean mountains. They are the heart of any serious defence system west of the Jordan. They are Israel's protective belt.

The Israeli presence in Judea and Samaria prevented war with Jordan. Only when there was no Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria, and central Israel was invitingly confined within the coastal strip, has Jordan in the past ventured to attack Israel.

ON WHAT else could the Americans rest their bald assertions that Israeli settlements are an obstacle to peace or, what they really want us to believe, that peace is obtainable provided only that Israel initiate the process by “freezing” the settlements and complete it

(as envisaged by the American plan, whose latest edition has been named after President Reagan) by giving up Judea, Samaria and Gaza to Arab rule?

In fact, their assertions rest on thin air. The only other evidence available to them is disastrous for their "case." All the Arab states, without exception, are committed to the doctrine, enunciated and repetitiously formulated in the PLO's Palestinian Covenant, for the dismantling of Israel and the "dispersal" of the vast majority of its Jewish inhabitants.

None of them has even paid lip-service to the notion that a withdrawal by Israel into the 1949 Armistice Lines means anything else to them than the next step towards Israel's extinction.

The suggestion that putting a stop to the settlement of Jews in Judea and Samaria would further the cause of peace is patently nonsensical. It is, however, dangerous nonsense: for it strengthens Arab confidence that they will yet, with American and other help, achieve their first objective: control of Judea and Samaria and Gaza.

United States identification with that objective is a demonstrable obstacle to peace. Consummation of the Reagan Plan would be the prelude to the Arabs' next attack on the Jewish State.

ISRAEL'S DIPLOMACY and all those engaged in stating Israel's position on the conflict with the Arabs should not hesitate to point out that if U.S. statesmanship were really concerned to achieve peace in the Palestine conflict and not merely to appease the Saudis, it would be urging Israel to maintain its territorial positions.

Far from working against the Israeli presence in Judea and Samaria, it should be happy to see more and more Jews going to live there.

The day will surely come when Washington recognizes this truth.