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PAWN IN THE U.S. ELECTIONS?

A and B are parties to a long-standing dispute. C, who has an interest in the subject of the dispute, while expressing friendly feelings towards A, and indeed manifesting them in other spheres, has repeatedly demonstrated that on the central issues in the dispute, he clearly favors B. Nevertheless, he declares himself ready to act as arbitrator, as "honest broker," between A and B.

Is there a sane businessman in the world, is there a lawyer acting for A, who would nominate C, a self-declared partisan, as an arbitrator? Need we be surprised to hear A from time to time declaring himself surprised, nonplussed, even betrayed, by C? This, admittedly in very rough outline, is the story of our government's relations with the U.S. in the context of the dispute with the Arabs. The fact that the attitude of the Bush administration has manifested itself in insulting behavior, must not be allowed to obscure two crucial facts. First, that this behavior marks the escalation of a gut element in long-term American policy.

That policy is based on Washington's wish, often articulated, that Israel withdraw to the 1949 Armistice Lines - give or take a few meters. Secondly, that the usual docile submission of our government, despite strong rhetoric, to American demands has encouraged that escalation. To put it more bluntly: if, when you are treated as a vassal, you bow to that treatment, you will continue to be treated, with increasing contempt, as a vassal.

Perhaps President Bush's behavior this past week will have one positive effect: that at long last this government and this long-suffering people will wake up to the bitter and now imminently dangerous reality that the U.S. government is not, cannot and will not be an honest broker between ourselves and the Arabs. As these lines are being written, it transpires that Bush's "invitation" to the parties to come to Washington, as proposed by the Arabs, for those "direct" negotiations, was accompanied by an agenda for the meetings. Washington lays down the subjects that must be discussed - all derived from the Arab agenda - for Israeli concessions on all fronts.

The instructions for Israel are presented as though to a nation vanquished in war. The government of Israel has enabled this hectoring process to go far enough. If it does not cry "Halt!" now, if it enters into substantive negotiations under American diktat, new diktats will follow at each stage, each stage one step nearer to the proclaimed common goal of the Arabs and Washington.

Every postponement, moreover, in making a stand until "next time" will find Israel weaker than the time before. It is crucial that our government take advantage of the criticism in the U.S., indeed the disgust, aroused by the enormity of Bush's behavior - by standing up straight and announcing that it has been forced to conclude that Washington is not acceptable in logic or in conscience, as an arbiter. No decent American, whatever his political leanings, will be able to deny the manifest justice of such a stand.

After all, acting the honest broker while unabashedly playing footsie with one side is not acceptable. Prime Minister Shamir, especially after the exhilarating reception accorded his unyielding addresses to Jewish gatherings in the U.S., must know how

American support for Israel will be enhanced by a dignified stand vis-a-vis this hostile administration. A NEW factor, unexpected and compelling, has entered the scene.

Has it not struck the government's policy-makers that the Bush administration has been evincing a haste, almost a frenzy, pushing for progress on its agenda for what it calls "bringing peace to the Middle East"? Time has become a crucial element for Bush. On the eve of an election year, he badly needs at least one great success with which to come to the American people. In the last few months, in greater intensity with each succeeding week, he has seen his popularity oozing away.

Accused, with much cogency, of having neglected domestic affairs in favor of an activist foreign policy, for which he was given tremendous acclaim during and immediately after the Gulf war, his record ever since has been one of unrelieved blunder. He is perceived as scratching around for some policy that might meet the problems left unsolved - problems, like an inevitably resurgent Iraq, perhaps even more dangerous to peace in the Middle East and indeed to the world, than before the invasion of Kuwait. More fiercely threatening to Bush, however, is the now heavy volume of public attack for neglect of the economy, precisely at a moment when an alert mind and a wise guiding hand are urgently needed.

The American economy is in a deep crisis - which, by all accounts, has been brewing for three years. Forecasts that the recession which set in 1988 would be reversed by 1991 have been refuted by events. Now the crisis has reached such proportions that it is described by sober American observers in almost apocalyptic terms.

The average growth rate throughout the Bush regime has been, according to official statistics, no more than 1.67 percent, the lowest since World War II and (according to a survey in Fortune magazine, November 4, 1991) is not expected to improve in 1992. The national budget deficit, estimated by the administration at \$200 billion, turns out already to be \$289 billion; and the question troubling economists is how much further it will rise during the coming year. These are mere indicators of a dismaying situation about which the prestigious Foreign Affairs magazine, for example, has written: "Never since the Great Depression has the threat to domestic well-being been greater." Many are the indications, economic and social, that this may be true.

In short: while up to a few months ago nobody dared envisage a serious challenge to Bush's second-term aspirations, today it is being seriously discussed. What then does a polished politician like Bush do in the face of such a sea of troubles - for all of which he is blamed and which he is unable to solve? He looks for one quick and big success with which to enter the election year. Ready to hand, there is only one.

He, Bush, will solve the intractable Arab-Israeli dispute. Bully Israel into submission, step by quick step, stage by quick stage, and maybe by the summer of 1992, well in time for the election, Israel will be seen on the retreat. Bush's obnoxious behavior is not accidental, it is a deliberate acceleration of policy.

Disregard criticism, then the fiercer the bullying, the quicker the submission - if you are successful. If you are unsuccessful, your critics - though probably not your victims - will forget the methods you employed. There are many circumstances which will help to deny success to Bush.

But in order to make certain of this, a drastic change in Israeli policy must take place now. Its guiding principle: Israel has no business interfering in American politics; but it will not allow itself and its future to be used as a dispensable pawn in promoting the

interest of any presidential candidate.