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Travesty of truth

POLITICIANS EVERYWHERE often tend to treat their publics as if they were a class of know-nothings and remember-nothings. American statesmen are no exception. One of the key passages in President Ronald Reagan's television address on September 1 is an example of grand dissimulation.

"The United States," he said, "has thus far sought to play the role of mediator; we have avoided public comment on the key issues . . . but it has become evident to me that some clearer sense of America's position on the key issues is necessary to encourage wider support for the peace process."

Nothing could be more misleading. In the process that brought about the Camp David agreement, it was Washington that initiated all the changes in the original Israeli "peace plan." U.S. mediation consisted almost entirely of pressing the Israeli negotiators to make concession after concession – "otherwise Sadat won't agree to negotiate."

The U.S. has, in fact, very seldom played the role of mediator. It has had a very definite policy of its own throughout the dispute.

Since 1967, its objectives have been fixed by the principle that Samaria and Judea (including east Jerusalem) are "occupied Jordanian territory." It has thus erased from the official national memory Trans-Jordan's rape of Western Palestine in 1948; and legitimized its annexation and the renaming of Judea and Samaria.

This grotesque travesty of historical and political truth, and of accepted norms of international behaviour, is encapsulated in the "operative" proposal that Israel must withdraw into the 1949 Armistice Lines ("with minor modifications"). All American diplomacy has worked towards that end since 1969. Mediation, indeed.

IT IS ALL the more amusing that Washington has described President Reagan's plan as "new." It is, in fact, the same old plan with cosmetic adjustments. Its essence: Israel's withdrawal from "all the territories" and their transfer to Arab rule. Period.

The notions ventilated by Washington that the U.S. would thereafter somehow influence the form of Arab government and its policy towards Israel are patently absurd.

(Five years ago, Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski, then President Carter's national security adviser, suggested, in conversation with me, the kind of plan now put forward by President Reagan. He even added demilitarization as bait. When, apart from other objections, I said demilitarization did not work and that nothing could prevent, for example, a Soviet airlift of arms, his reaction was that "Israel could always go back in." I replied that then he would be the first to denounce Israel for invading Arab sovereign territory and to demand that Israel withdraw within 24 hours. He smilingly refrained from denying the imputation.)

THE KEY ELEMENTS in the "Reagan plan" were proposed in formal terms in December 1969 – by Secretary of State Rogers. They included just about all the cosmetics of the Reagan version. The Rogers plan, too, emphasized its adherence to Resolution 242, including the provision for "secure and recognized borders (though hastening to add that only minor modifications of the 1949 Armistice lines were envisaged. It even emphasized that Jerusalem must remain united. The Reagan plan

differs from it in substance only by providing for local autonomy for the Arabs of the “West Bank” and Gaza – within Jordanian sovereignty, of course.

The Israeli Government rejected the Rogers plan outright – after calling Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin from Washington for consultations. Prime Minister Golda Meir attacked the plan in two trenchant speeches in the Knesset. She was quoted as saying privately that acceptance of the plan would be an act of treachery.

WHAT IS TRULY new then about the Reagan plan is the friendly response of the Labour Alignment. Mr. Peres and his colleagues (who endorsed the Camp David agreement) pretend not to be aware that the very promulgation of new proposals itself undermines that agreement, pre-empting the negotiations which, under the agreement, are to take place years ahead, and replacing them by a pre-cooked outcome.

Though the plan calls for complete Israeli withdrawal (slightly modified) – the Labour leaders pretend that it is similar to their own idea – which is to partition Western Eretz Yisrael. The Labour plan (unless it has been secretly changed) involves the retention under Israeli sovereignty of the strip along the Jordan, the Etzion-Hebron bloc, several areas in Samaria and united Jerusalem. Mr. Peres and his colleagues cannot but be aware that this plan is as unacceptable to the Arabs – and thus to Washington – as any other plan which does not guarantee the complete surrender of “all the territories.”

They have turned their backs on Golda Meir’s sanity of purpose – and their motives are transparent. They aim at inducing the Israeli public to believe that their “moderate” policy of “compromise” will find favour in the eyes of Washington. They assume that this could be a major factor at the next election, or maybe even earlier; that the sense of dependence on the United States in Israeli society is strong enough to assure them of a majority.

Nothing could suit the American policy-makers better. Indeed, they are uninhibitedly happy about the internal opposition which they expect Labour (and its fringe-group allies) to develop to the government’s policy. They hope that this will impose restraints on Begin when, as they believe, he agrees to negotiate with them on the substance of the “plan.”

It will be presented to him as an adjustment of the Camp David agreement: allowing the participation of the Arabs of east Jerusalem to take part in the election of the autonomy council for the “West Bank”; freezing settlements in Judea and Samaria – to encourage the Arab inhabitants to join the autonomy process; and on the assurance that King Hussein and not Yasser Arafat will be sovereign in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, an Israeli promise to surrender “all the territories” (with, of course, minor modifications).

Diplomatic pressure will be accompanied by a campaign in the media: it will inevitably be orchestrated with European diplomacy and with world-wide Arab propaganda.

This prospect is one reason why Secretary of State George Shultz reacted calmly to the passionate declarations by the prime minister in the Knesset that he was entering upon the struggle for Eretz Yisrael which, as he rightly declared, was a matter of politics to the United States, but a matter of life to the Jewish people.

THERE IS, however, another reason for Mr. Shultz’s cool comment that Mr. Begin’s speech was merely the opening gambit in negotiations. The Americans have heard it

before; and the State Department experts have in front of them the Camp David agreement and the minutes of the discussions.

There is no hint there of Zionist inspiration. There is not a single word there about the unique relationship of the Jewish people with its historic homeland, not a word of its rights to the country.

The agreement accords to Egypt and Jordan equal rights with Israel in deciding on the final disposition of the “West Bank,” and accords a veto right on that crucial subject not to the Jewish people, but to the Arab inhabitants.

All this was signed and approved by the prime minister of Israel. Why, then, should the Americans not assume that when Mr. Begin reverts to his pre-Camp David formulations they are anything more than an opening gambit?

The prime minister’s reply to President Reagan’s letter compounds the blunders of the Camp David agreement.

The agreement *did* give the control of internal security to the Arab autonomy council, not Israel. The agreement *did* accord Jordan a status in Western Eretz Yisrael.

But this is not the time and these are not the circumstances to argue with Washington over this or that clause in the Camp David agreement. The U.S., like Egypt, is no longer interested in the Camp David process.

If the prime minister wishes the Americans to take him seriously, and if he understands that the issue is once more Eretz Yisrael or Falastin, and truly intends to rally the people in Israel to that banner – he must, without delay, make it clear that for him, too, the Camp David agreement, holus bolus, is dead.