

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
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BUSH'S FATAL ATTRACTION TO MIDDLE EAST DIPLOMACY BODES TROUBLE FOR HIS PRESIDENCY

Mark L. Melcher

Of all the problems confronting George Bush, probably none carry more potential for exploding in his face than the situation in the Middle East.

Bush certainly has some understanding of this, as evidenced by his initial reluctance to help the Kurds avoid being slaughtered. On the other hand, the fact that he couldn't avoid involvement for more than a few days shows clearly that simply "not wanting to get involved" won't keep him out of trouble.

Furthermore, his knowledge of the full extent of the potential problems facing him in the Middle East is apparently not complete, as evidenced by his repeated promises both during and after the Iraqi war that he intends to establish a "new world order" in the area.

Attempting to assess the scope of problems that await Bush in the Middle East is, of course, fraught with pitfalls. But as I implied earlier, the situation there could hold the key to the success or failure of Bush's presidency during the next few years. It must, therefore, be addressed. So here goes.

I believe that the negative effect the Middle East mess will have on Bush's presidency will be directly proportional to his personal involvement in the area, i.e. the more involvement the more trouble for his presidency. This is not good news for Bush, who, notwithstanding his failed attempt to keep free of the Kurdish situation, seems to have some sort of fatal attraction for meddling in Middle East politics.

For sure, peace in the Middle East is a worthy cause for a U.S. president. But the fact that Bush began this quest for peace by jumping whole hog into the Israeli-Arab dispute is a sure sign that neither he nor his Secretary of State Jim Baker really understands why the region is in such turmoil in the first place and how intractable the conflicts are. This point was driven home early and strongly by the fact that Baker was on a plane to Israel even before the dust had settled on

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the Iraqi battlefields and despite continued protests during the war that he recognized no linkage between Saddam Hussein's actions and the Palestinian issue.

No matter what side one takes in the Israeli-Arab dispute, certain facts are immutable. The first is that no matter how slick Jim Baker talks, he isn't going to convince Israel to give up land to Arab states, so long as these states are publicly pledged to Israel's destruction. Consider this.

Israel is smaller than either New Hampshire or Vermont. On most world maps, it is too small to have its six letter name written within it. Its population is less than five million. It is surrounded by nations with combined land masses of millions of square miles and with greater combined populations than the United States. And most of these countries, at one time or another, in one way or another, with guns, tanks, terrorists, or oil money have tried to destroy it.

Syria is run by as big a butcher as Saddam Hussein and is nine times as big as Israel with three times as many people. Iraq, where Saddam still rules, is 20 times as big as Israel with even more people than Syria. Iran, which is ruled by religious fanatics desperately opposed to Israel's existence, is 80 times bigger than Israel with almost 50 million people. And Bush begins his peace quest seeking concessions from Israel? It won't work.

It isn't a question of whether Israel should or shouldn't make those concessions. It is a simple fact that it won't. The Middle East is a dangerous place and Israel's position there is already dangerous enough without gambling on the sincerity of Arab promises. The chances are it won't get an opportunity to make that decision anyway because no Arab leader, especially one of the more dangerous ones, is going to renounce his country's pledge to destroy Israel. And even if one tried it, he almost certainly couldn't unite the citizens of his country behind his action and he definitely couldn't bring his neighbors on board because each is hated by his neighbors.

Now, let's say, for sake of argument that I'm wrong; that Israel and enough Arab states agree to a framework for peace between them that is lasting and real. Then, Bush would be not much closer to his goal of bringing permanent peace to the Middle East than he is now. The fact that the Iraqi attack on Kuwait had nothing to do with Israel should have tipped him off to this reality.

The simple truth is that the Middle East is destined for decades of war and turmoil, and this situation has virtually nothing to do with Israel. It is associated instead with such factors as out-of-control population growth; regional water problems so severe that they seem destined to lead to bloodshed between nations; abject poverty living side-by-side with arrogant wealth; rampant, centuries-old racial and ethnic hatreds; and a long history, which continues today, of being dominated by brutal tyrants and arrogant autocrats, who have no respect for human life or Western values. This latter problem is aggravated today by a new awakening among some groups within these nations to the benefits of individual freedom and democracy.

The bottom line is that all this bodes poorly for Bush's pledge to establish a "new world order" in the Middle East. In fact, he is in for a long, difficult and frustrating time there that will be aggravated by an almost-certain continued U.S. troop presence in the area and a seeming inability on his part to moderate his involvement and his promises.

I am not saying here that the Middle East will cost Bush the presidency. Barring some truly astonishing set of circumstances, the Democrats don't have a prayer of beating Bush in 1992. You can't beat something with nothing and the current crowd of prospective Democratic candidates make the "seven dwarfs" that began the race for the Democratic nomination four years ago look like paragons of wisdom and political acumen.

But the Middle East has been a festering sore for centuries and will most assuredly be one for many decades to come. It will be a thorn in the side of Bush's presidency and it will affect his ability to adequately address domestic economic issues, issues for which he seems to have little interest even when a major foreign policy problem isn't on the front burner.

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