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"Hindmost Protection"

By Kenneth W. Stein

They appear almost weekly: renditions, rebuttals, interviews, OPED pieces, public presentations, and lengthy analyses of who did what to whom and what was (not) agreed upon during and after the July 2000 Camp David talks. At no previous time in the last quarter-century of active Arab-Israeli diplomacy have so many varying public accounts been issued immediately following an active negotiating process, and all possessing awkward consequences.

If you are a junkie for nuances and renditions of who said what to whom, who blinked, then buckle up, because the sensational tell-all lengthy memoirs are still to come. Be prepared for the onslaught when Clinton, Ross, Indyk, and other American, Israeli, and Palestinian officials, as well as scholars and analysts, bombard you with their accounts next spring and summer. Your 2002 gifts for Mother's and Father's Days are in the spinning stage.

One central issue characterizes the debate: Arafat's role in the failed talks and subsequent violence. Put differently, if Arafat is guilty for not pulling the trigger for peace, but instead for instigating and not halting the violence, then he is not a suitable negotiating partner. Or, if Barak ineptly choreographed the diplomacy and offered him much less than he could ever accept, then neither Arafat nor his positions on Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and settlements should be disqualified in the next stage of U.S.-sponsored negotiations. In a broader sense, positions are being staked out about how Arafat will be viewed by history.

So far only a relatively few knockdown pitches have been thrown at the Clinton administration's record. But then, those pitching their spins are, by and large, those who had vested interests in the so-called "peace process," or were/are attached at the hip to the negotiators. In this raging public debate, there is finger-pointing, self-justification, and [not surprisingly] little blame-taking. Personal accounts are rarely hallmarks of studied objectivity.

Israel's former Prime Minister Barak and William Safire pilloried Arafat for lacking political will and courage (New York Times, 7/30/03). Dennis Ross, the recently retired U.S. ambassador for Arab-Israeli negotiations, noted that Arafat "really can't do a permanent deal"

(Jerusalem Post, 7/22/01). Ross reportedly said at a public lecture at Ben-Gurion University: "Chairman Arafat could not accept Camp David...It was too hard for him to make this decision, because when the conflict ends, the cause that defines Arafat also ends."

Defenders of Arafat among American, Israeli, and Palestinian voices argue that he was being forced to sign a capitulatory agreement with regard to land, Jerusalem, and refugees. Collectively, they claim that Barak was in too much of a hurry to do a deal. Barak is cited for pushing Clinton to convene the summit when the time was not ripe, guilty for having undefined "redlines," and then forcing him to accept impossible positions.

Deborah Sontag's 6,000-word compilation in the New York Times (7/27/01) criticizes Barak and says all parties are to blame for what did not happen at Camp David and afterwards. Her piece was ripped apart by Daniel Pipes, a Middle Eastern historian and political analyst, in the Jerusalem Post (8/01/01). The most lengthy defense of Arafat and criticism of Barak appeared under the pretentious title, "The Truth About Camp David," in the New York Review of Books (8/09/01). Written by Robert Malley, a member of the Clinton National Security team at Camp David, and Hussen Agha, a Palestinian writer, the authors blame Barak for wanting to reach final conclusions on all issues, while never being clear about his own negotiating parameters. Foreshadowing this harsh reproach of Barak, Malley claimed in an earlier piece (Ha'aretz, 7/08/01) that, at Camp David, Israel did not meet most of the Palestinians' legitimate aspirations, did not test Arafat's intentions, and that the Palestinians did make concessions, such as considering to accept less than all of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem territories they wanted. Malley gave credit to Arafat for "considering" something less than he wanted. Merely showing up is not praiseworthy. It is what a leader does that matters. Finally, it is not the conclusions that Malley reaches which perturbs me, it is that a member of the American negotiating team and others have rushed to market their views. Time-honored diplomatic circumspection is violated.

Silence should be maintained while the diplomacy is ongoing. I simply cannot imagine that those who engaged in shuttle diplomacy with Kissinger in the 1970s or those who supported Carter in chaperoning the Sadat-Begin dance would run to blab within moments of leaving office. America does not generate confidence among already paranoid Israeli and Palestinian negotiators about our secret-keeping ability. The craving need-to-tell-all, or most of it, is called "hindmost protection." When the call motivates to serve again, one can say, "You see, my hands-- not theirs-- are relatively clean."

Beside the complicated issues, personalities, and diverse publics that constrain management, if not resolution, of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there is now an exploding historiography. Each side will defend and entrench their parochial viewpoints further. Wait until a columnist finds a secret memorandum in a brown envelope inside his/her morning paper, then we shall have revisionist historiography, still without perspective. Never boring.

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