

OUR PETULANT PRESIDENT

We have been given another glimpse of the power of our President in the matter of Israel -- including the power to distort.

Whatever may have happened since then, last week's episode stands by itself.

Rarely had a factual situation been so clear on the international scene. Israel had agreed to sign the Camp David Treaty. It was Egypt which came up with some new post-Camp David conditions, to be added before it would sign. But it was Israel which was blamed by Washington for obstructing the agreement.

It is not as though the new retroactive conditions by Egypt were insignificant details. They completely changed the nature of the Camp David agreement.

The basic nature of the Camp David agreement was that a full, normalized peace would be established between Egypt and Israel, if Israel would return the Sinai. In short, Israel was irrevocably giving away land important to its defense, in exchange for a revocable promise that it would not need such defense.

The second aspect of the Camp David agreement was Israel's promise to move towards some solution of the Palestinian Arab problem. Israel committed itself to instituting self-governance for the West Bank, and to some future plebescite. No time-table was established because everyone understood that a time-table would depend on the willingness of Israel's Eastern neighbors to negotiate. Israel, for example, could not sensibly institute anything permanent on the West Bank without discussions with Jordan. But when would Jordan be willing to have such a discussion?

Now, in effect, Egypt announced that it would not establish full peaceful relations with Israel until the time-table was *completed*. What did that mean? It meant that Israel was now asked to give up the Sinai in exchange for *no* promise -- because the Arab nations on which the time-table would depend were making no promises.

Egypt turned Camp David around by stating that it would not exchange Ambassadors until the completion dates for the time-table were announced; and that it would not reject the possibility of joining other Arab nations in making war against Israel. If the completion dates were not met -- and that depended on those Arab nations who promised nothing -- then Egypt would be free to wage another war. But Israel was being asked to give up the Sinai, from which area such a war against Israel would be mounted!

It was as outrageous as that, a slick con game which would not have fooled any normal ten year old child. It did not fool the Israelis. But it seemed to fool the President and his entourage.

A passing point: If the President is saying that Israel should give up everything and rely only on America's guarantee of support, then his cavalier actions this past week with respect to Taiwan and Iran were not very comforting.

Now President Carter is a man of at least normal intelligence. Some other factor must have been operating. Perhaps he was petulant that his role in history as Middle East peacemaker was being disturbed. He couldn't seem to do much with the Arabs. He got the Saudis the lethal weapons they wanted. But they continued to work against him and Camp David. Their nose-thumbing was probably a factor in Sadat's slick new maneuver. On the other hand, the Israelis are more vulnerable. After all, if the Arabs start another Middle East war, Israel will survive only with American help.

Whatever the cause of Carter's distortion last week, his statements dominated the headlines.

Most Americans take their cue from Washington D.C. on a matter like this. They don't unravel the complexities. They don't read far into the stories, or editorials. They certainly don't pay attention to the leaflets or newspaper ads of involved parties. They rely on the "official" viewpoint.

Congress stands alone in its ability to curb the nature of the President's intervention in the Middle East; or to curb his influence on public opinion, by presenting another "official" viewpoint. It is up to Congress to repair the truth which the President mangled. And unless the last few days have seen some significant change in situation, it is up to each constituent to urge his or her Congressman and Senators to do just that.

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