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SOAP OPERA

Malcolm McDonald recalled that in 1939 "one of my problems was that there were about 30 Jews in the House of Commons, almost all of them Zionist, and there were other non-Jewish members who were influenced by having a big Jewish vote in their constituencies."

McDonald, as British Colonial Secretary, was trying to hold down Jewish immigration to Palestine in the face of severe Palestinian Arab protests. A staunch pro-Zionist for many years, McDonald had just gone into office. A leading Zionist said that McDonald was "probably the best appointment that would be made from a Jewish point of view."

But after several weeks in office, McDonald said: "I was advised that unless we reduced Jewish immigration there was a real risk of the Arabs joining Germany and Italy." Is the basic scenario familiar? We have seen it many times in England and the U.S. and we are in the middle of a re-run right now.

The scenario is grounded in a tragic situation whose essential element has not changed: both Jews and Arabs have a reasonable claim to the same land. The Jews were there for about a thousand years, and had the last indigenous government there. But that was about 2000 years ago. The Arabs have been there in recent centuries in much larger numbers than the Jews. The Jews wanted to go back, and have done so. The Arabs wanted to stay, and now want to go back. It is an almost insoluble dispute.

Some of us see a couple of critical differences: the Jews have no alternative; the Arabs do. The Jews can't afford a mistake; the Arabs can. But the Arabs don't accept that difference; it is their homeland as well.

Now enter that Major Power, which is relatively friendly towards the Jews and their claim. The Arabs had a certain leverage on that Major Power in the 1930s and has even more now. In the 1930s, Britain said to the Jews: "In order to fight the Nazis, we need your cooperation in this." In the 1980s, the U.S. says to the Israelis: "In order to save the U.S., your chief mainstay in the world, we need your cooperation in this."

But there is a little difference in perception. The U.S. position has not changed since 1967: "Give up most of the West Bank -- or take more gambles in the autonomy plan -- and we will guarantee your security. Is that too much to ask?" But Israel, which joins with the PLO in the belief that the West Bank could be a Trojan Horse, remembers Golda Meir's response to that guarantee of security: "By the time you come, we will no longer be here."

Now comes the Third Act, where a figure entitled "Jewish Lobby" is wheeled onstage. McDonald did it in England in 1938; Forrestal did it in the U.S. a few years later; Fulbright and McCloskey have done it on a regular basis; and now there is talk about how strong the Jewish Lobby must be, to have made the President withdraw from one aspect of the recent U.S. action in the U.N.

The stage is now thick with the suggestion that the Jewish Lobby -- Israel and American Jewry -- be laid across the railroad tracks. But so far in the American version, the cavalry led by Congress has charged onto the stage to reveal a case of mistaken identity: it is not the Jewish Lobby but American National Interest which is being laid across the railroad tracks. The American audience applauds and whistles and Israel and American Jewry are saved as the curtain falls, rather uncertainly, waiting for the play to start all over again.

If some of the elements in this scenario aren't changed, someday there might not be a last-minute cavalry charge, and the American version of this drama could end more tragically.