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The Spider To the Fly

The longer an American President is in office, the more annoyed he becomes with Israel.

That seems to be a natural law affecting Presidents past, present and future, whatever his starting sympathies for Israel. After all, we seem to need the friendship of certain Arab states, because of oil and the Soviet Union, and these Arab states and their American champions constantly complain to the President about the intransigence of Israel.

How much less troublesome it would be if the U.S. could give the Arab states something; the West Bank, for example, as a kind of Valentine Day's present. It is after all, a very small area, mainly populated by Arabs, and destined not to become a permanent part of the Jewish State. Turning it over now would be a gamble, yes--but with a U.S. guarantee against harm to Israel, it could allegedly remove a major barrier to U.S.-Arab friendship. The fact that Israel, a dependent client of the U.S., refuses to accept the gamble, is a growing irritant to any sitting President.

The Congress, however, has not been so directly subject to the same pressures. It is only because of the indirect pocketbook influence of Congress that Presidents have not become more punitive towards Israel. The question is whether Congress--now under the pressure of oil-caused inflation--is beginning to look more favorably on shooting dice with the West Bank.

The different emphasis of our two Peninsula Congressmen, both of the same Party, reflects the Congressional split. Congressman "Pete" McCloskey of the South Peninsula puts the emphasis on what he considers Israel's intransigence, saying recently that the U.S. is "clearly wrong in our unstinting position of supporting the Israelis" with respect to the West Bank. Congressman Bill Royer of the North Peninsula puts the emphasis on Israel's centrality: "It is the only stable democracy in the region, and with Islamic fundamentalism causing instability in the area, Israel must play a significant role as we attempt to protect our interests in the Middle East." Which Congressional emphasis will dominate?

Perhaps it is necessary, again and once again, to strip away the false issues. The issue is not whether Israel will permanently annex the West Bank. The bulk of Israelis, and of American Jewish opinion, is against any such annexation. Among other things, it would mean the end of the Jewish State. In that context, the issue of settlements and the like may be handled badly at times, and is then a legitimate subject for serious tactical criticism, but does not touch on the central issue for the U.S..

The central issue turns around this bald fact: the PLO is an arm of the Soviet Union--and even more intrinsically a fundamental enemy of the United States. The PLO is trained and armed by the Soviet Union, from which the PLO has just received a shipment of tanks.

A PLO spokesman (Hani al-Hassan) has proclaimed that the PLO is allied with

Khumeini in his struggle against "U.S. imperialism." Wafa, the PLO's news agency, said that the PLO stands "on the side of the Islamic Iranian revolution in the confrontation with the conspiracies of American imperialism and Zionism." The Shora, the committee of Iranian "students" holding American hostages, critically includes members of the PLO. Moscow-trained PLO specialists are helping to train the new Iranian secret police. An official PLO spokesman (Kaddoumi) praised the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, calling it "assistance to a friend."

Arafat often plays the "good cop" with U.S. representatives, saying that if only the U.S. would give the PLO what it wants (the West Bank as a Palestinian state), the PLO would be more friendly. Come into my parlor, says the spider to the fly.

Presidential irritation notwithstanding, what we would be gambling with, at house odds, by turning the West Bank over to the PLO, would be nothing less than: American presence in Middle East, American access to oil, and centrist leadership in the Islamic world.