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Peace promise for Jerusalem



In the end, the White House did for Israel and the Palestinians what they could not do for themselves, and pushed aside the probability of more slaughter for a promise of a true peace in Jerusalem for Christmases to come.

At its end, the Reagan administration leaves behind a legacy of innocents' blood shed uselessly, much of it American. Begin with the 248 Marines exposed disastrously to the fratricidal Middle East slaughter. Add Leon Klinghoffer and Robert Stethem. Remember the hostages, particularly Terry Anderson and William Buckley, tortured to death.

But don't forget the Israeli, Lebanese and Palestinian lives that might have been saved had the departing administration begun eight years ago an intensive search for peace in that unhappy region.

From the outset, Ronald Reagan wore an old movies' cowboy hat in his approach to the Middle East. The natives were little more than good Indians (Israelis) and renegades (Arabs) in his eyes, which saw only black and white. There was never indication that the president understood that "out there" real men, women and children shed real blood most days he sat in the Oval Office.

It may not be entirely accurate to lay at Mr. Reagan's feet the responsibility for the year-long Palestinian uprising. The intifada resulted from over 20 years' oppression by an occupation army, tacked on to a similar period when people in the West Bank and on the Gaza Strip lived under other foreigners. (To equate Egyptians and Jordanians to Palestinians has no more logic than lumping French, Germans and Bulgarians together simply because they are Europeans.)

However, dating back to 1948, no U.S. presidency's record in the Middle East has been marred by the myopic simplicity that characterized Washington the past eight years.

Take the bombing raid on Libya. It failed miserably in its avowed purpose of stopping terrorism and left behind dead civilians, including children, who were regarded as victims of U.S. aggression. It gained sympathy for Gadhafi who had been a despised pariah to other Arab leaders and much of the civilized world.

At the same time, sending Navy jets against Libya unsettled the Western Alliance, divorcing this country from

Paris, Bonn and Rome, if only temporarily. Among America's major allies, London alone stood fast at Washington's side.

However, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher did not subscribe to the Reagan administration's decision to bar Mr. Arafat from coming to New York. Her U.N. representative was instructed to abstain from the motion that moved the General Assembly to Geneva, but solely on the basis that its language was too harsh toward the United States.

Its nearly total isolation from the international community in its waning

days compelled the Reagan administration to open a dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Without the reversal, George Bush would have inherited a White House, bankrupt of any pretensions to world leadership. And at the very time Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was successfully selling the birth of a new morality in the former "evil empire."

Indeed, the case has been made that the president-elect and his designated secretary of state demanded that George Shultz formulate a solution to rescind the position he had assumed over the objections of virtually every other U.S. official concerned with the Middle East and our national security.

At any rate, in my view, the real winner last week was neither George Bush nor Yasser Arafat, but Israel. However slim, there is the chance the Jewish state will now be able to pull back from a path that could have only led to its eventual destruction.

A nation's sole reliance upon armed might to maintain its existence made no sense in Biblical times; it amounts to a death wish in this age when weapons have the potential to wipe out entire populations.

Israeli hard-liners may have been comforted by their abundance of thermonuclear armaments in the Negev desert, but since the last Middle East war (1973) there has been a steady growth in other regional arsenals, including chemical weapons. Killing off the world's entire 200 million Arabs could only come at the cost of their nation's 3 million Jews, and then what?

The truth has long been apparent that there can be no peace in the Middle East without Palestinian participation. This was the single point Anwar Sadat

repeatedly made in his historic speech in Jerusalem 11 years ago. The Egyptian president went to his death a failure, despite his Nobel prize, because of his inability to make himself heard above the din of domestic politics, in this country and Israel.

It now must be regarded a blessing that Washington moved to accept dialogue with the PLO before Israel settled on a government for the next five years. It weakened the claim to U.S. support for those intent on crushing the intifada, never mind the cost in human lives, Israeli and Arab.

The key to bringing Palestinians to the peace table always lay in the acceptance of their status as human beings, with every right to choose their representatives. Setting up puppets never works. Ignoring that history lesson cost the French dearly in Algeria, to cite but one example.

This Christmas, for the first time in generations, there is a promise of peace for Jerusalem and all the land Holy for the West's great religions. Delivering on the peace will require tremendous effort from all men and women of good will. But finally a promise is there.

A little prayer would not hurt. *Boruch attenoi. Allah rahman.* Dear Lord. By whatever name. For the children's sake, grant us peace for Jerusalem, and for all mankind.