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Hostage politics



When the latest released hostage stepped into the Middle East spotlight this week, the scurrying within the Reagan White House amounted to a stampede. No one ran for distance more than the vice presidential Republican candidate.

Mithleshwar Singh was not born in the U.S.A., but entitled to Washington's protection only as a legal resident of this country. Therefore, freeing him from his Islamic Jihad captors produced no capital gain for the incumbent party in this year's elections.

Quite the opposite possibility loomed before an administration still smarting from the Iran-Contra scandal. The objective of that bumbling failure was to bring home from Lebanon kidnapped Americans in the month before the 1986 elections, creating a feel-good consensus that would translate into continuing GOP control of the U.S. Senate.

In recent weeks, as reports surfaced that negotiations might produce freedom for remaining American hostages, and maybe Briton Terry Waite, the White House maintained a studied silence, at least initially. Official denials of any deal-making were withheld until the final days, a matter of hours before Mr. Singh came out.

As it happened, when the India-born finance professor was turned over to the American embassy in Damascus, the most embarrassed faces belonged to local officials. To keep White House hands clean, Syrian diplomats had done the haggling with the kidnapers.

In the end, the administration's Arab agents were stuck with the blame, admitting their disappointment when their efforts produced only Mr. Singh, taken with three U.S.-born colleagues at the American University in Beirut 20 months ago.

Maybe, in time, the details of the deception will come out; the Middle East keeps few secrets.

But, by then, except for a few men in Damascus, only committed observers and students of the Arab mentality will remain interested in the latest example of how Lebanese radicals spit in Syria's eye. And there's no other way to interpret the kidnapers' failure to deliver a "genuine" American. They knew the difference.

On the other hand, Damascus has no basis for accusing the Jihad of complete dishonesty. After all, a hostage was set free. The Syrians had no choice but to take their public lumps and hope for

better luck next time: *Insha'llah* (God willing).

In any event, the real target of the practiced deception was the White House, make no mistake. The Reagan administration was set up, left with a quasi-American, instead of the real thing.

Indeed, it can be suspected that political mischief motivated, from the start, the haggling for the hostages' release by the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine — to give the full

name to the organization which kidnapped the four professors.

The I.J.L.P. is very small, estimated at no more than a handful. It has nothing to do with the kidnapers of the other Americans and Mr. Waite. The four teachers are its only claim on world attention.

Although several Lebanese radical groups stick in their title the word Jihad, which means "a holy struggle," the only bond they apparently share is some loose connection with Iran's Khomeini regime.

Lending credence to the theory that the Reagan administration was up to its political hips in the I.J.L.P. negotiations was a story out of Paris, which asserted the speaker of the Iranian parliament had met with a former State Department employee, Richard Lawless, acting on behalf of GOP candidate Bush. The story's source was former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, now living in exile in the French capital.

Mr. Lawless denied his involvement "categorically." White House and State Department representatives went only so far as to state that no negotiations had taken place under official auspices. Faced with Washington's indignation, Mr. Bani-Sadr relented only to the degree that he said: "... it was probably (Mr. Lawless)."

Working against accepting the denials is — most of all — the Tower Commission Report on the Iran-Contra affair, which showed the same pattern of employing former officials in secret negotiations that had the same objective: securing the return of hostages to boost GOP fortunes in an upcoming election.

Furthermore, Jimmy Carter

attempted an identical gambit, and fell on his nose, in 1980. Iran sending home the embassy prisoners provided the real highlight of Mr. Reagan's first inauguration, the flood of good-will evoked that day paid off for the administration for months afterwards. It became only natural for Republicans to attempt to recreate that glorious feeling, to their specific advantage.

However, this week Americans learned once again that Washington remains in a dense fog when trying to find its way around the Middle East. Quick-shot diplomacy might bring freedom for a few, but it cannot prevent other Americans from being taken hostage. This is not a personal opinion, but brutal fact.

Instead of election year gimmicks, this country's leaders must develop a consistent, coherent policy that takes into consideration our needs as a nation balanced against the realities, not our illusions, in the entire Middle East. When that happens, there will be no more Americans taken prisoner for political purposes. Until that happens, the world lives on the edge of a massive nuclear war touched off by weapons which lie at this moment beneath the region's desert sands.