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An Offer That Can't Be Refused

In 1973, Richard Nixon responded to a memo from Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser, by writing, "The time has come to stop pandering to Israel's intransigent position. Our actions over the past have led them to think we will stand with them regardless of how unreasonable they are." Almost 20 years later, that message has finally been delivered.

But Bush is the first American president to go public with his frustration—at a press conference in which he employed for Israel a tone once reserved for Saddam Hussein. He demanded that Congress postpone action on Israel's request for \$10 billion in loan guarantees (not aid, mind you) and promised a veto if Congress went ahead anyway. Bush said nothing short of Middle East peace was at stake.

Nonsense. What's at stake here is the president's nose. It's been out of joint ever since Secretary of State James Baker III was three times greeted in Israel by the cacophonous establishment of more West Bank settlements. The erection of those settlements, the bellicosity and intransigence of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir (not to mention the Maniestic Destiny mentality of Housing Minister Ariel Sharon) leave all sounded

to Bush like a personal challenge—not to mention cause to wonder about the word of the Shamir government. During the day, it talks reasonably about settlements. At night, more and more of them go up.

Lobbyists for Israel who are now wringing their hands over Bush's latest threat seem to forget that Shamir and Sharon (or is it Sharon and Shamir?) seem intent on settling the West Bank in such a way that it—and especially East Jerusalem—will irrevocably remain a part of Israel. To an American president, it hardly matters whether Sharon intimidates Shamir or has the prime minister's consent. What matters is that every settlement is more than a place to live for Israelis. It's also an expression of contempt for a president who's not all that favorably disposed to Israel anyway. Over at Walker's Point, Shamir must be considered downright weird. Bush has almost no beliefs while Shamir would kill for his. But being right is not the same as being either wise or sensitive. The settlement issue while vexing was not also pressing. It could have waited until the Middle East peace conference was convened. In the first place, no Arab state has

publicly raised the settlements issue as a precondition for attending a peace conference. And, second, if Israel is ever to renounce further settlements (no certainty, by any means), it would do so only in exchange for something momentous from the Arab states—not mere loan guarantees from Washington. That was the Camp David formula. Israel gave up the Sinai in exchange for peace with Egypt. For peace, a majority of Israelis might be thrilled to kiss even the settlements goodbye.

Whatever division exists in the American Jewish community or within Israel over settlements is not present, though, when it comes to helping Russian Jews emigrate to Israel. That has been a longtime goal of American foreign policy (the Jackson-Vanik amendment, for instance) and a passionate crusade for American Jews—especially by those with ancestral recollections of Russian antisemitism. It seemed to all concerned that this was a worthy humanitarian effort, distinct from settlements or any other issue—an effort that had strapped the American Jewish community to the tune of \$900 million in loan guarantees. The Bush administration was supposed to do its part. Instead, one delay has been followed by another.

The Israeli government is right now mulling what some might call an American-offered compromise. Actually, it's nothing of the sort. No matter, Jerusalem should accept it. It simply cannot win a fight with an American president over what most Americans would see as an aid package. Israel cannot play the role of the ingrate, spurning one offer of charity and demanding something else on its own terms. Even if the Israeli lobby could win this fight in Congress, the legislative victory would amount to a stunning public relations loss. It should not be attempted.

Above all, though, Shamir and other Israeli politicians have to understand the new realities. They cannot persist in thinking that with communism's rigor mortis and Israel's diminished strategic value to the United States, nothing has changed in Washington. Much has. With the Cold War over, the sentiments of Richard Nixon (or Jimmy Carter) can now be implemented by a president who is all too anxious to do so. Bush seems intent on teaching Shamir a lesson every-one American kid already knows: Beggars can't be choosers.