U.S. Politics and the Middle East Crisis.
By WILLIAM V. SHANNON
New York Times (1857-Current file); Jun 12, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2002)
pg. 44

U. S. Politics and the Middle East Crisis

By WILLIAM V. SHANNON

Among all the other complex ramifications of the Middle East crisis, President Johnson has undoubtedly given some thought to its effect on the future prospects of the Democratic party.

There is nothing unusual in his doing so. For any government responsible to its own electorate, a foreign crisis always has a domestic political dimension.

The President has to bear in mind two potentially divergent attitudes in the country. Most Americans are sympathetic to the Israelis. The White House quickly corrected the State Department spokesman who put forward the absurd notion that Americans are as neutral in words and thoughts as Washington has been in its deeds.

At the same time, there is a natural reluctance to see the United States drawn into armed conflict. War at any time is a desperate last resort, and doubly so when the United States is pinned down in a major military effort in Vietnam.

Acting Prudently

President Johnson temporized over fulfilling this country's clearcut obligation to uphold Israel's right of innocent passage through the Gulf of Aqaba. This was not only because he wanted to act prudently but also because he wanted to be seen by his fellow Americans as acting prudently.

If American military involvement occurred, he did not want it thought that he had left any peaceful alternative unexplored. As events developed, Israel's swift victory and the Soviet Union's refusal to support its Arab clients took the President off the hook politically.

The President's temporizing caused disappointment in Israeli official circles. But no one familiar with the problems of leading public opinion in a democracy would fault Mr. Johnson, inasmuch as his fundamental determination to take overt action, if necessary, was not really in doubt.

Political Realities

It would be easy to explain any Democratic Administration's sympathy for Israel in terms of the political power of American Jews. There are only 6 million Jews in this country out of a total population of almost 200 million. But they are concentrated in a half-dozen politically pivotal states—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois and California.

American Jews tend to be politically alert, and they are particularly significant as voters and fund-raisers in the Democratic party.

Because of these political realities, President Johnson and other leading Democrats are naturally responsive to pleas for Israel. There has been considerable cheap amusement in recent days at the spectacle of Senators Kennedy, Clark, Morse and others who are doves over Vietnam suddenly becoming hawks over Israel.

But to regard the American political support for Israel as merely a reflex to the presence of a bloc of Jewish voters in this country would be a superficial and much too cynical reading of the situation. The fact is that the Jewish tradition is an integral part of the Western tradition, and Israel, as a beachhead of European civilization in the Middle East, has a natural claim on American sympathies as do Greece and Italy and Britain. Moreover, Americans, having stood by helplessly while the Nazis murdered European Jewry, would feel intolerably guilty if they now permitted the Arabs to destroy the Jews in Israel.

Another side of the story is the lack of any positive American feeling toward the Arabs. This is not, as the cynics say, because there is no Arab-bloc vote. Americans admire efficiency and competence, and they have the distinct impression that with the exception of the Bourguiba Government in Tunisia, the Arabs are neither efficient nor competent.

Egypt is the best-known and therefore the least-popular Arab country. When John Foster Dulles cut off aid for building the Aswan Dam in Egypt in 1956, his decision was highly popular in both parties in Congress. Last week, when Colonel Nasser's armies were getting mauled, there was vicarious satisfaction on Capitol Hill, and it extended from Brooklyn Democrats to Iowa Republicans who have scarcely a Jewish voter in their districts.

Roots of Democracy

If the Johnson Administration were ever to turn its back on Israel, that would unquestionably have adverse effects for the President and his party in the next election. But that is not going to happen. And the reason is not that Jews or any other ethnic voting bloc control the making of American foreign policy. Rather, it is because in a democracy, policy is rooted in the attitudes and moral feelings of the nation.

As the pro-Israel demonstrations in Paris suggest, not even the French are capable of the *sangfroid* that President de Gaulle's policy of amoral detachment requires. In this country, President Johnson recognizes that our commitment to Israel derives from our national character and outlook. He is free to maneuver in the fulfillment of that commitment, but he could no more have abandoned Israel than President Roosevelt could have abandoned Britain in 1940-41.

WILLIAM V. SHANNON is a member of the editorial board of The Times.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.