

{NOVEMBER 20 2004}

WHO'S NEXT?

George W. Bush is a product of the Wild West myth. He sees himself as the fast-drawing sheriff who kills the bad guys and maintains order in town.

But in fact he is much more like another stock figure of the Westerns: the top-hatted vendor of the patent medicine which heals everything: tooth-ache and belly-ache, cholera and impotence, gunshot wounds and heart attacks.

Bush's patent medicine is called "democracy". Democracy will heal all the diseases of the Middle East and the entire world. If only the Muslim nations would buy his little flask, all problems would be solved, and foremost among them the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And since Israel is already an exemplary democracy, led by that great democrat, Ariel Sharon, all that is needed now is to impose democracy on the Palestinians. This means free elections for president and parliament.

A person with limited intellectual capacity needs simple solutions. A one-dimensional solution that does not demand delving into the complexities of other societies and civilizations. What's good for his little Texan town must be good for Baghdad and Gaza, too.

Since winning reelection, his self-confidence has shot sky high. He has kicked out the hapless Colin Powell and put a certified yeswoman in charge of the State Department. From now on, nobody will question his decisions anymore. Not even if he appoints his horse Chief Justice.

So who is worried? Of all people, Ariel Sharon, his great friend, teacher and guide.

As fate would have it, Bush achieved his great victory one day before the sudden, mysterious breakdown of Yasser Arafat's health. Sharon's alibi was buried in Ramallah.

Successive Israeli governments have presented Arafat as a monster and used his monstrosity as a pretext for undermining any attempt to impose peace upon them. Peace means withdrawing to the pre-1967 border, more or less, and dismantling the settlements. Peace means giving up East Jerusalem, more than half of the "eternal

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capital of Israel". God forbid!

The demonization of Arafat helped avoid this. After all, one cannot make peace with a monster. Even Bush understood that. Therefore he helped Sharon prevent elections for the Palestinian Authority, in which Arafat was certain to be reelected by a landslide.

But now Arafat is not there, and Bush is. Sharon is very troubled. And rightly so.

For four years, the mantra in Washington has been: Fighting International Terrorism. That suited Sharon fine, since he was riding on the "fight terrorism" horse anyhow.

For the next four years, the new mantra in Washington may well be: Democracy for the Middle East. That will suit Abu-Mazen, who is riding the democracy horse.

Abu-Mazen has been chosen as Chairman of the PLO. Abu-Mazen wears a business suit, not a uniform. He wears a tie, not a kuffieh. He looks like an ordinary democratic leader. He is known for his opposition to the suicide bombings in Israel. Contrary to all Israeli predictions, the Palestinian transfer of power has taken place in an orderly manner, much as in any civilized country. Within two months, new elections are to take place.

That puts Sharon on the spot. He cannot object to elections, since they are the apple of Bush's eye. He must not raise the slightest suspicion that he is undermining them. Any complaint about the Israeli army hindering elections by incursions, roadblocks and "targeted assassinations" may arouse the ire of the White House.

Sharon is hoping that the Palestinians will sabotage their elections themselves. Armed factions may disturb the orderly process. Last week there was shooting during Abu-Mazen's visit to Gaza – which caused an outburst of joy and glee in Israel. But the incident passed, all Palestinian factions are showing restraint and the people are unified in their desire for peaceful elections.

For Sharon this is a nightmare. The way it looks now, elections will indeed take place, with several candidates standing – and Abu-Mazen will be elected president.

For Bush that will be a great achievement: the first Arab democracy will be on its way. Even if anarchy reigns in Iraq, Palestine will prove that his vision is coming true. Bush will embrace Abu-Mazen. The way to a "free Palestinian state" within four years will be open.

For Sharon, there is no greater danger. His plan – to annex 58% of the West Bank to Israel – will be struck from the agenda. He will be requested to dismantle most of the settlements, and before that to freeze all of them.

Worse: the intimate, exclusive relationship with Bush will be upset. The couple will become a triangle, and three is a crowd. Already Condoleezza is about to meet Abu-Mazen.

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So what can be done? Clearly, Abu-Mazen has to be destroyed before he gets the chance to put down roots. But it is also clear that Sharon cannot conduct any overt act against him. A strategy of indirect approach is indicated.

Even before Arafat returned his soul to his maker, Sharon declared that there will be no negotiations with his successors until after they “put an end to terrorism”. He hoped that the magic word “terrorism” would make Bush jump. And since even Arafat, with all his towering authority, did not disarm Hamas and Jihad, there is not the slightest chance that Abu-Mazen could do it.

The Americans did not fall into this primitive trap, and so Sharon decided to be a little more sophisticated. This week he announced that he will not speak with Abu-Mazen unless he immediately stops the “incitement” against Israel in all Palestinian media and schools.

Abu-Mazen might just as well be requested to pluck the moon from the heavens. How could the new democratic chairman abolish freedom of speech on TV and in the press – while incitement against the Palestinians continues in the Israeli media at full blast, not to mention their dancing on Arafat’s grave? And how does one change the schoolbooks (most of them Egyptian and Jordanian in any case) within two months – while in Israeli schools, especially the religious ones, both orally and in writing, the right of the Palestinian people to their country is totally denied?

The presentation of impossible demands as a pre-condition to negotiations is an old trick of Sharon’s. One may assume that the Americans will not fall into this trap again. Something more extreme and immediate must happen. For example: bloody attacks, acts of “terrorism” that can be attributed to the new chairman, civil war, anarchy.

Abu-Mazen and his colleagues know this full well. They are working to prevent this. Since they lack the means to apply force, they must use persuasion. The traditional Arab method is “Ijmah” – a round of discussions that goes on until everybody is persuaded, so that no minority will feel that it has been vanquished by a majority. Arafat was a past master of this.

If this succeeds, there will be a temporary cease-fire until the elections. But the main problem will remain: the new Chairman will be unable to persuade his people to end the armed intifada if he cannot show another way of ending the occupation and achieving Palestinian independence. If the Americans want the new regime to take hold, they must bring about the immediate start of negotiations, with the clear aim of establishing the State of Palestine within a strict timetable.

Sharon will do everything he can to destroy Abu-Mazen before this happens. He wrecked the first Abu-Mazen government, two years ago, by withholding anything which might contribute to political progress (blaming, as usual, Arafat). Now he must

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wreck Abu-Mazen under much more difficult circumstances.

Let no one have any illusions: Sharon will use every means, overt and covert, in order to destroy any “moderate” Palestinian leadership. His natural ally is Hamas, which opposes any negotiations with Israel. As of now, Abu-Mazen is Enemy No. 1.