

Bush's December Surprise

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Fundamentally Freund

With just a month left to go before he leaves office, George W. Bush has decided to pull the trigger and drop a bomb on the Middle East. Only instead of targeting Iran's illicit nuclear program, or Syria's nefarious regime, the outgoing US president has inexplicably chosen to detonate a diplomatic device over the heads of all Israelis.

In a move that was said to have been "personally led" by Bush, diplomats from the 15 member nations of the UN Security Council convened for an emergency session on Saturday to discuss the text of a proposed resolution aimed at tying the hands of Israel's next government.

The draft resolution, which was slated to be passed Tuesday, calls on Israel and the Palestinians to continue to negotiate "core issues" such as dividing Jerusalem, even after the present Israeli and Palestinian governments leave office in 2009.

"The initiative," as Haaretz reported on Sunday, "is seen as a bid to cement the Annapolis process with the approval of the highest authority," with Bush hoping that Security Council backing will make it "irreversible." This, he believes, will result in "shielding it from the administration changes in both Israel and the US."

"Bush," the paper noted, "believes that a UN resolution will sum up his efforts toward Middle East peace and underscore his vision of two states for two peoples." And so, for the sake of putting a positive spin on his presidential past, Bush is prepared to mortgage Israel and its future by getting the UN to tighten the screws on the Jewish state.

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Knowing full well that a new Israeli government, most likely headed by Binyamin Netanyahu, will take power in February, Bush prefers not to let the people of Israel decide their own fate. Instead, he is attempting to impose a diplomatic straitjacket on Israel's democracy by trying to compel the next government to continue with the largely futile process of negotiating with the Palestinian leadership.

This is Bush's December surprise, a last ditch and pitifully transparent effort on the president's part to salvage what little remains of his once grandiose plans to establish a Palestinian state.

AFTER ALL, it was just six years ago, back on June 24, 2002, that Bush gave a major speech at the White House articulating his firm support for the creation of "Palestine." After calling for a new Palestinian leadership to replace Yasser Arafat, Bush declared that "when the Palestinian people have new leaders, new institutions and new security arrangements with their neighbors, the United States of America will support the creation of a Palestinian state."

The Palestinians, of course, eventually did get a new leader in the form of Mahmoud Abbas, but they have still proven both unwilling and incapable of reaching a deal with Israel. If anything, with Hamas now in power in Gaza, and Abbas' authority barely extending to his own secretarial staff, Bush's much-ballyhooped vision for Middle East peace, in which he invested so much time and energy over the years, clearly lies in tatters.

It is therefore all the more appalling that in trying to establish a legacy, Bush has chosen to expend some of his last remaining political and diplomatic capital in order to generate future pressure on Israel. Just think what he could still accomplish on issues of major foreign policy significance if he put his mind to it. He could be turning up the heat on Iran to forestall its nuclear progress, or taking concrete steps to block the flow of foreign jihadists from Syria into Iraq.

Bush could take action to hit the terrorist lairs in northwestern Pakistan, where Osama bin Laden and the Taliban are believed to be based, or he could lead an international effort to oust Zimbabwe's disastrous dictator Robert Mugabe. Instead, he has chosen the easy way out, grasping at the far simpler straw of trying to lock Israel in place in a process almost certain to fail.

How sad and how pitiful that the man once considered Israel's best friend in the White House has chosen to send the Jewish state to the doghouse, all in the vain hope that future historians might view him in a more positive light.

Bush's desperation brings to mind another lame-duck US president who, more than 30 years ago, tried to leave his own mark on history before heading out the door, only to see it rebound against him.

IN THE waning days of his brief term of office, Gerald Ford put forward a last-minute proposal to grant full statehood to Puerto Rico, which has been a US commonwealth since 1952. The haste and timing of the move, which ultimately went nowhere, evoked a great deal of scorn and even ridicule, for it was patently clear to all concerned that it was little more than an outgoing president's feeble effort to insist that he still mattered.

Commenting on Ford's proposal, Time magazine declared in its January 17, 1977 issue that it "surely reflected the familiar predicament of a lame-duck chief executive whose desire to deepen his mark in history is matched only by his loss of real power." Three decades may have passed, and the personalities and issues involved may have changed - but that sentiment remains as accurate now as it was back then.