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Barack Obama, a True Friend

WHAT SHOULD WE SAY OF AN AMERICAN PRESIDENT who tells the Knesset that negotiating with “terrorists and radicals” is like appeasing Nazis, but who bargains with states like Libya and North Korea over nuclear disarmament and with Iran over stabilizing Iraq? And suppose a Republican presidential candidate endorses the implied appeasement charge against his opponent, suggesting that while the Democrat is surely Hamas’s best friend, he himself will never truck with terrorists. Next, imagine that just before the election spotlight shines upon him, this same Republican announces that sooner or later we’re going to have to talk to Hamas.

George Orwell, author of the dystopian novel “1984,” called all this Newspeak. In Newspeak, explained Orwell, one displays “a loyal willingness to say that black is white when Party discipline demands this” and that “the enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil and it followed that any past or future agreement with him was impossible.” In Oldspeak, diplomacy meant bargaining, directly or indirectly when needed, with one’s foes, as well as with friends. In Newspeak, we never talk of such things, even when our leaders do them because they must. In Oldspeak, we do as we say and say as we do. In Newspeak, we say what we want the people to think and then do as we wish.

Barack Obama represents a revival of Oldspeak to a people grown weary of the gaping chasm between rhetoric and results, happy-talk and truth, from an administration that promised Americans security and global triumph, and its Jewish citizens undying friendship to Israel. While a stubborn minority clings to fantasies of “moral clarity” on absolute good and evil and vanquishing Israel’s enemies, many now see that the swashbuckling moralists have boosted the “evil doers,” while whispering sweet hosannas to Israel in Jewish ears.

These dragon slayers have broken the Arab state, which was Iran’s chief rival, installing Shi’ite-led Iran-friendly rule in Iraq. In the name of “freedom” and “democracy,” they foisted new elections on the Palestinians, against both Israel’s and Fatah’s better judgment, letting Hamas win power. Then, they armed Fatah against Hamas in Gaza, hoping to depose the Hamas-led authority, until Hamas preempted, wresting control of Gaza from Fatah.

They fiddled with toothless sanctions while Persian centrifuges spun. They neglected the most potent U.S. economic and political inducements, while Iran leapt forward towards nuclear weapons’ breakthrough. They refused to lure Syria away from Iran in a pax Americana, as we once did Egypt from the Soviet orbit, allowing the Syrians to keep funneling more lethal arms to Hizballah and Hamas, magnifying the threats to Israel.

Obama has blasted the Bush crew for pressuring Israel to duck peace

parley with Syria, despite the conviction of both its prime minister and defense minister, and much of its security establishment, that engaging Damascus would be to Israel’s advantage. Only two governments on earth are in shock over the newly revealed Israeli-Syrian dialogue: the Iranian regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Bush administration, which reportedly called Israel’s overture towards Syria “a slap in the face.” Such language is not unlike that doubtlessly heard in government halls in Tehran and Hizballah’s Beirut these days about their Syrian ally.

But don’t expect Syria’s President Bashar Asad to publicly surrender his chief asset and strongest bargaining chip – his marriage of convenience with Iran – in the opening act. Engineering this break will take a bountiful dowry from the wealthy American and Western families of the Israeli would-be bride. The prospects for success will depend, in part, on whether a new U.S. president seizes the opening, persuading Syria of the benefits we will offer in exchange for spurning Iran, Hamas and Hizballah.

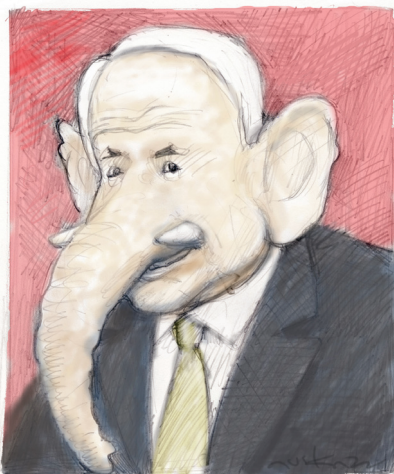
Barack Obama and John McCain bring to this pregnant Mideast moment two sharply divergent conceptions of America’s place in the world. Reflecting his grasp of the supporting role

the United States must play as a true friend of Israel, Obama responded that he has “consistently said that the United States must stand ready to help Israel achieve peace with its neighbors and should not block Israel from the negotiating table, nor force it to negotiate.” McCain’s spokesperson offered the laissez-faire bromide “that the sovereign government of Israel should be free to make its own decisions on how best to defend Israel and whether to engage in negotiations.” (Read: Knock yourself out, Israel. But don’t come to us for help.)

Facing down Iran, Obama will marshal all elements of American power on behalf of security and peace in the region, wielding both carrots and sticks. McCain’s longtime cheerleading for the hawkish “talk and walk” of the Bush league leaves little doubt that a McCain administration will be hostage to the same martial doublethink: an over-reliance on arms and isolation as magic potions for all that ails America and Israel, Orwell’s perpetual war clothed in earnest devotion to Newspeak “diplomacy.”

“It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words,” remarked Orwell’s character Syme, reveling in the way the cleansing of language constricts thought, stamping out the very idea of imagining alternative courses of action. But then he was fictional, of course. ●

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