

Blip or Bust?

By Leonard Fein

Although there wasn't much reason for optimism at the start, the human spirit rises irrepressibly, and by the time Barak and Arafat stayed on while President Clinton went off to Okinawa, many of succumbed to guarded hope. And now that hope has crashed. What next?

The good news (and please understand, everything is relative) is that subjects that had hitherto been taboo have now been painstakingly discussed. Sooner or later, for example, there had to be negotiations regarding Jerusalem - and it turns out those negotiations, though so far unproductive, have happened sooner rather than later. It is possible, of course, that the limits have been reached, that the remaining gaps cannot be breached. From this distance, it seems clear that Prime Minister Barak is devoutly committed to achieving an agreement that will put a formal close to the century-long conflict; one wishes it were clear that Chairman Arafat shares that commitment. But note: It is not clear that he does not. Arafat, not less than Barak, lives with aspirations and with pressures, and what was not thinkable in July may, as time runs out, become more palatable by September. Surely both leaders still understand that the situation may change significantly once Bill Clinton leaves the White House.

In short, while the end of the negotiation is upsetting, it is not yet demonstrably calamitous. The calamity begins when the principals find no way to meet and talk in the weeks ahead, when Camp David comes to mark an end and not merely an interruption.

The nature of the calamity, if that is what develops, is easy enough to specify. No Israeli candidate will be able to run on a peace platform. "We tried," they will say, "we went as far as we could go, there was no response. What else is there to say?" Yet even such a calamity - studded, as it surely would be, by violence - would not necessarily endure for very long. For as soon as it would become clear to the Palestinians that the Israelis have lost interest in a peace process, they might bestir themselves to do what the Israelis have themselves until now done - approach a reluctant partner with their own proposals.

In the meanwhile, Mr. Barak returns to an Israel that knows, for the first time, that he means what he says when he says he has "red lines" he will not cross. Those red lines are not where many Israelis would prefer they be, but the polls in Israel these last two weeks have been encouraging: Asked how they would respond to an agreement to end the conflict, even if tinkering with Jerusalem were part of the deal, as many 60% of Israelis said in some polls that they'd welcome it. If there proves to be another opportunity for Barak to negotiate, Israelis are likely to give him greater support; his credibility within Israel will have been significantly enhanced.

All this is inherently speculative. One can as easily generate genuinely desperate scenarios: Arafat declares a Palestinian state unilaterally, the Jewish settlers in what then becomes the sovereign (and internationally recognized?) state of Palestine refuse to leave, the Israeli army to defend them, and suddenly the Israeli army is, again, seen by the world to be invading a foreign country. One does not want to imagine the level of violence that might well ensue.

But for the time being, disappointment rather than despair is the appropriate reaction to what's transpired. Mr. Barak, as uninterested as he's shown himself to be so far in Israel's domestic agenda, will now have little choice but to grab hold of that agenda. And it is chock full of issues that have for too long been postponed. The most obvious issue is the question of religion, specifically of Orthodoxy's religious hegemony, but that one may continue to prove intractable. In any event, the more urgent issue has to do with income distribution, with the fact that the income gap in Israel is wide and growing wider, that there is very substantial poverty in what once was self-consciously a welfare state. There's the quality of the schools, there are a host of pressing environmental questions, there's a rising crime rate - in short, there's work to be done, challenges to be met.

The trouble is, of course, that one cannot simply turn one's back on the Palestinian question and pretend it doesn't exist. It erupts in exceedingly unpleasant ways, does not let you ignore it. And the policy choices it forces you to make in these uncertain circumstances are vexing. Shall Israel continue to permit 40,000 Palestinian workers to enter Israel each day? Should Barak throw peace into the deep freeze by moving towards a government of national unity that would include the Likud? What level of weapons should be provided the settlers so that they are enabled to defend

themselves? Or, quite the reverse: Should Barak continue to make pacific gestures (e.g., releasing more Palestinian prisoners) in order to demonstrate that he hasn't given up?

The only thing that's certain here is that William Jefferson Clinton deserves the genuine gratitude of all who care for peace. It is no small thing to do what he did, even if, in the end, the effort did not succeed. No, it is a very great thing. May he go from strength to strength. And may the process, somehow, continue.