

Yemen Redux

As the events unfold with the Saudi and Egyptian engagement in a new war in Yemen, I was reminded of my 1962 discussion with President Gamal Abdel Nasser on "his" Yemen war. What Egypt experienced then may be germane today because, as Mark Twain is alleged to have said, "history doesn't repeat but sometimes it rhymes."

I had then visited Cairo to try to persuade Nasser that his real challenge, and one on which he could make a real contribution was on the "home front." He had begun to uplift his people with programs designed to create a new Egypt and a new Egyptian. Education and public health measures were making significant progress, but much remained to be done and Nasser had limited means at his disposal. My theme was he needed to concentrate his efforts and avoid wasteful foreign adventures. Yemen, to which he had contributed the best units of his army and much of the financial, diplomatic and political resources of his country, was at the top of my list. In the first minutes of our talk, I emphasized the danger that Yemen posed for his regime and his goals.

In this, our first lengthy talk on Yemen, he listened careful but with obvious and growing annoyance. He explained, as he must have done to many diplomats, why he had become engaged: the revolutionary new government had not only begged his assistance and cast themselves as his brothers-in-arms against the forces of reaction and obscurantism, but warned that without his help, they would probably be overwhelmed the coalition of Yemeni royalists, Saudi Arabians and English mercenary soldiers.

I did not dispute the danger to his regime, but pointed out that his resources were few and already strained and that he could not afford the danger of defeat.

Then, rather angrily, he replied to one of my comments, "you don't think I will win the war, do you?"

I decided to seize the minute: "No, Mr. President," I replied, "I don't."

"Well, you would be surprised to know that I have acquired your secret analyses of guerrilla warfare," he somewhat testily replied.

"Oh, Mr. President," I shook my head, "I know the people who wrote those reports. They are rubbish. I would throw them away if I were you."

He just looked at me, even more angrily, thinking I suppose, that in response to his having pulled off an intelligence coup by acquiring out closely guarded and presumably super intelligent analyses, I was trying to trick him by claiming that it was really not a coup but a mistake.

He shook his head and went on: "I know how to use helicopters, too."

Surely, I could not scoff at that because using them was then being publicly touted by our military as our great weapon against the Viet Minh.

I shrugged and commented, unfairly I admit, "and you lost one yesterday, didn't you?"

"How did you find out about that?"

As I remember, my reply was rather flip. "Well, Mr. President, we spend a lot of money on the CIA finding out about such things and one way or another they usually do. That is what the CIA is supposed to do. They don't always succeed but sometimes they do. Frankly, I don't know how they found about this one. But we lost so many in Vietnam, I guess they have learned how."

"Well," he retorted, "you American's think you know all about everything, and you don't even have any of your people in Sanaa and none up in the north where the fighting is going on. You don't know anything about Yemen."

Then, without thinking of the implication, I suppose, he said, " You should go see for yourself."

"Mr. President," I quickly said. "I regard that as an invitation." Impolitely, in a breach of protocol, I then stood up.

He looked at me with narrow, angry eyes. He obviously had not meant to imply what I had inferred. I thought I must be getting close to getting thrown out of the room or even out of Egypt, but instead, he looked at me evenly, even coolly, and without a moment's pause, said, "All right, go see. I will give instructions that you can go anywhere you want, talk to anyone you want, see everything.."

I pressed my luck. "But, of course, Mr. President, I can not even get there without your help," I said.

"You can have my plane."

That, obviously, ended our talk. Rather off-handedly and not warmly, we shook hands.

I turned and, thinking I should do something before he changed his mind, I rushed back to our embassy and wrote an "eyes only" message to President Kennedy. I did not want it scattered around our government so I prevailed upon the CIA station chief to send it by his rather more restricted route. It was encrypted and sent in three batches. Before the second batch got sent, a reply came back: "go."

So I went, and Nasser was as good as his word. I was given an airplane to fly up to the northern city of Saada where our intelligence agencies reported major battles. The local Egyptian commander, a very laid-back General Al-Qadi, had been briefed. He met me at the plane and asked what I would like to see. Then he personally drove me to the villages I had named. I saw a lot of armed tribesmen, as one always saw in Yemen, but no sign of military action. The CiA and British Intelligence, MI-6, were hoping for a war, but it had not yet happened.

Then back in Sanaa, I met and talked with one after another of all the members of the new government. They were an odd lot. General Sallal -- prime minister, minister of war and head of state was a gruff fellow, sure of himself but almost totally unconnected with the outside world. His world was the neighborhood of Sanaa. He knew "his" tribesmen, but, as far as I could tell in our couple of hours together, neither knew much about the pro-royalist tribes nor cared much about them. They were the problem for the Egyptians.

The Egyptians were running everything that ran. I spent hours with the military commander, "Field Marshal" Abdul Hakim Amr, who got down with me on our knees on

a huge map of showing the planned Egyptian armored sweep through the mountains to the east. While he gleefully showed me, soldier-like, the stages of the winning campaign, he was being angrily whispered to by another man. Anwar Sadat, then rather on the fringes of the Egyptian Establishment and despised by Nasser and the inner group of the original "Free Officers" cabal, was protesting (in Arabic which he assumed I did not speak) against Amr's indiscretion with a foreigner. A person who he assumed was a spy. Sadat never forgave me for being there and I would pay for that later, after Nasser's death).

Then, having answered every question I could think of, I flew back to Cairo on the President's airplane.

Disclosure (as they like to say in the media): I was bribed. As a going away present, I was given 500 pounds of Yemeni coffee. Nothing so welcome to a traveler as 500 pounds of anything! But thanks to me, our Cairo embassy was "in coffee" for years!

I did not see President Nasser on my return but sent him a message through the Governor of Cairo, Salah Dessouki, that I hoped to go down to the Saudi-Yemen frontier to meet with the guerrilla leaders, and somewhat jokingly I said to my friend Salah, "I want to be very sure that President Nasser knows exactly where I am going.

"And, Salah, please tell the President not to do anything silly."

Salah burst out laughing and said, "Bill, I certainly will not say that to the President!"

So I flew to Riyadh and, with the permission of then Crown Prince Faisal, with whom I had a rather close relationship, I took the American ambassador's airplane and flew down to Najran where I spent an evening with a group of the Yemeni royalist guerrilla leaders.

As we sat around a campfire, outside of Najran, we drank tea, ate a lamb roast and then, in a fairly typical desert encounter, we had a poetry duel. My pure luck, I happened to know the poem being recited and I capped the verse of one of the men.

In their terms, that was like a *laissez passé* for me. I was "in."

We could then have - and did have -- a serious and frank discussion on the war, the strengths and weaknesses of the royalist forces and what might bring the war to a conclusion. Our talk went on almost all night.

Finally, just at first light, I had barely gotten to sleep when the first of four Egyptian but Russian piloted TU 16 jet bombers arrived overhead from Luxor. They dropped 15 200 kg bombs on the oasis and on us. My pilot was just worried about his plane. The rest of us had other worries! The biggest danger, in fact, was not from the bombs but from the shrapnel falling from the anti-aircraft cannon. They were totally ineffective against the TU 16s as they could not reach them. As one of my aides, an Air Force colonel, informed me the TU-16s were at about 23,000 feet far above the range of the 90 mm anti-aircraft canon. The "engagement" did not last long, but a dozen or so people close around us were killed. Another of my aides, a Marine Colonel, presented me with a wicked looking piece of one of the bombs. It had fallen or been blown not far from the place I was lying.

On our return flight to Riyadh, I wrote Nasser a 'thank you' note, saying "Mr.

President, I am most grateful for your kind hospitality in Egypt and Yemen but I don't think you needed to entertain me in other countries."

Our ambassador, my good and old friend, John Badeau, was not amused. He said, "Bill, just say thank you and, please, don't hurry back!"

It was a few months later that I next saw President Nasser. We had a long and very frank talk then about Yemen. I went back over some of my earlier remarks. I compared the war to Vietnam which I was already sure would be a disaster for America. I pointed to the huge cost to us of Vietnam, how it disrupted all our domestic social goals and how it poisoned Americans' trust in one another. I warned that in my opinion, Yemen might do the same to Egypt, disrupting what Nasser was trying to do to end the tragic poverty of his people.

As we parted, he said, "I certainly didn't agree with you, Bill, but I knew you would tell me the truth as you saw it." Much later and in a different context, this was to have important consequences. Somehow, the Israelis found out about our meeting and knew what Nasser had said. As the chief of Mrs. Meir's cabinet, Mordachai Gazit then told me, "We know that President Nasser trusts you."

As I was leaving, he took me out to my car and even opened the car door for me. His guards were as astonished as I was, Apparently, he had never before done this. As we shook hands, he said, "Well, Bill, where are you off to this time?"

"This time, Mr. President," I laughed, "I am not going to tell you!"

He too burst out laughing.

We did not meet again, but as Mark Twain had said, sometimes history rhymes. His respect for my frankness later, shortly before his death, enabled me to work out the 1970 ceasefire on Suez with the Israelis and the Egyptians.

On another level, it is possible that history today is not only "rhyming" but actually repeating. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have taken up where Nasser began. They are again engaged in a counter-guerrilla war in Yemen. This time, the tools are different. Saudi Arabia has an American donated air force that Nasser did not have and so far, at least, they are being cautious about putting "boots on the ground." But the effects on the two countries may turn out to be similar. If so, will it not be Egypt's Vietnam but also Saudi Arabia's. I think it is very likely. All of the signs point in that direction. And, as I have laid out in numerous essays on Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Mali and Algeria, and in my little book *Violent Politics* guerrilla wars are almost never "won" but usually drain the supposedly dominant power of its wealth, moral position and political unity.

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