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President Truman, the State Department and the Palestine Question

by Shlomo Slonim

In common with many other presidents of the United States, Harry S. Truman had his share of difficulties with the bureaucracy. These difficulties were particularly pronounced in relation to State Department handling of the Palestine question. In his memoirs Truman highlights the problems caused by officials who, he claims, were unwilling to accept the policy line which he had set and who repeatedly sought to undermine the Administration’s pro-partition stand.¹

In the running dispute between the White House and the State Department over the conduct of America’s Palestine policy in 1948, two episodes stand out in particular: (a) the proposal to substitute a temporary trusteeship for partition, announced by the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Senator Warren R. Austin, on 19 March 1948; (b) the endorsement by Secretary of State George C. Marshall on 21 September 1948, of the Bernadotte proposals ‘in their entirety’. In both instances the President’s ire was greatly aroused, and major crises within the Administration were narrowly averted. The dimensions of the clash were hidden from public view, and in each case President Truman subsequently had occasion to reassert his pro-partition stand.

The partition plan was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 29 November 1947, with the full backing of the United States. The vote in the Assembly was 33 to 13, with 10 abstentions. It is safe to say that if not for the vigorous support of the United States Administration, the partition resolution would never have been adopted by the requisite two-thirds majority.² David Horowitz, who was then a Jewish Agency official, wrote: ‘As a result of instructions from the President . . . the United States exerted the weight of its influence almost at the last hour, and the way the final vote turned out must be ascribed to this fact’.³

Prior to the vote, certain State Department officials had sought, in the strongest terms possible, to dissuade the Administration from
supporting the partition scheme. Foremost among the critics was Loy Henderson, Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs, who, on at least three separate occasions, argued the case against American endorsement of the partition programme. The first time he did so was at a meeting of the US delegation to the United Nations on the eve of the opening of the General Assembly’s 1947 session, where he argued that the report of the UN Special Committee on Palestine, which recommended partition, was “not based on any principle, . . . [but] was full of sophistry”. The majority report, if accepted, could be implemented only by force; and, in the absence of some overriding principle, Henderson could not see any justification for American support for the use of force, a stance which was sure “to incur enmity”.

A week later, on 22 September 1947, Henderson dispatched a lengthy letter to Secretary Marshall in which he analysed in detail ‘Certain Considerations Against Advocacy by the US of the Majority Plan’. He warned that American support for partition would undermine US relations with the Arab and Moslem world at a time when the West was becoming increasingly reliant “on the resources of the area”. Additionally, Great Britain’s efforts to secure bases and to ‘remain as a stabilizing power in the Eastern Mediterranean’ would be adversely affected, and the Arab world would likely be led to align itself with the Soviet Union. Moreover, the partition plan was unworkable, he claimed, and US support for the plan was sure to invite pressure for a US role in its implementation. The majority proposals “ignore such principles as self-determination and majority rule. They recognize the principle of a theocratic racial state and even go so far in several instances as to discriminate on grounds of religion and race against persons outside Palestine”. Henderson recommended that the United States “not play too active a role during the United Nations debates. America, he stressed, should be, ‘so far as possible, strictly impartial’. In conclusion, Henderson warned that, unless some sort of trusteeship were instituted, “the Palestine problem will probably become even more of a world problem than at the present time”.

Henderson’s lengthy memorandum, evoked no change in US policy. As a result, on the eve of the critical partition vote in the General Assembly, Henderson was prompted to warn the Administration of the dire consequences of its pro-partition stand. In a memorandum to Under-Secretary of State Robert A. Lovett, dated 24 November 1947, Henderson wrote:

“I feel it again to be my duty to point out that it seems to me and all the members of my office acquainted with the Middle East that the policy we are following . . . is contrary to the interests of the United States and will eventually involve us in international difficulties of so grave a character that the reaction throughout the world, as well as in this country will be very strong”.

He reverted to the prospect of ‘incurring long-term Arab hostility’ and then cautioned forcefully once more against American involvement in the use of force in the Middle East:

“It seems to me that we ought to think twice before we support any plan which would result in American troops going to Palestine. The fact that Soviet troops under our plan would be introduced into the heart of the Middle East is even more serious”.

None of these considerations effected any change in US policy in support of partition, which remained constant throughout the Assembly vote.

The attitude of the administration was best reflected in a series of letters sent by President Truman to King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia during 1946 and 1947. In a letter dated 25 October 1946 Truman wrote:

“The tragic situation of the surviving victims of Nazi persecution in Europe presents a problem of such magnitude and poignancy that it cannot be ignored by people of good will or humanitarian instincts. This problem is worldwide . . . The plight of the Jews . . . is particularly tragic in as much as they represent the pitiful remnants of millions who were deliberately selected by the Nazi leaders for annihilation. Many of these persons look to Palestine as a haven where they hope among people of their own faith to find refuge, to begin to lead peaceful and useful lives, and to assist in the further development of the Jewish National Home.”
The Government and people of the United States have given support to the concept of a Jewish National Home in Palestine ever since the termination of the First World War, which resulted in the freeing of a large area of the Near East, including Palestine, and the establishment of a number of independent states which are now members of the United Nations. The United States, which contributed its blood and resources to the winning of that war, could not divest itself of a certain responsibility for the manner in which the freed territories were disposed of, or for the fate of the peoples liberated at that time. It took the position, to which it still adheres, that these peoples should be prepared for self-government and also that a national home for the Jewish people should be established in Palestine. I am happy to note that most of the liberated peoples are now citizens of independent countries. The Jewish National Home, however, has not as yet been fully developed.

In a follow-up letter dated 24 January 1947, Truman went on to say:

‘The United States is anxious that this problem shall be solved in a manner that will be recognized by the world as just and fair. As I indicated to you in my message of October 25, the United States and other Powers, which as victors in the First World War bore a certain responsibility for the future of Palestine, took the position following the conclusion of that war that Palestine should be the site of a Jewish national home. There was a strong feeling in this country that the Jewish people who had made so many notable contributions to the world were entitled to a national home of their own, and it seemed appropriate that this national home should be established in a land which for thousands of years had been regarded by Jews as their spiritual home... No people has suffered more than the Jews during present years from aggression and intolerance. No people stands more in need of world sympathy and support at the present time’.

Several days before the General Assembly vote on partition, Truman added a further consideration:

‘One of the important factors influencing the decision of the United States government to support the majority plan of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine was the fact that it represented the majority views of a committee specially appointed by the United Nations to consider the question’.

These considerations, however, do not seem to have modified the thinking of State Department officials. Thus, no sooner had the partition resolution been adopted than these officials began to press for withdrawal of American support from the plan. On the one hand, this withdrawal of support would take the form of an arms embargo on Palestine, and on the Middle East in general, and on the other, it would lead to the substitution of an international trusteeship or some other scheme for partition. By 17 December 1947 barely two and a half weeks after the Assembly vote, a top-secret memorandum already circulating in the State Department recommended that: ‘The United States should immediately announce that we have become convinced that the partition of Palestine is impossible of implementation’. The memorandum was frank in stating:

‘The petroleum resources of the Middle East are of vital importance to US security, and continuing access to these resources depends on friendly US relations with the peoples and governments of the Arab states. The US and USSR played leading roles in bringing about a vote favorable to partition. Without US leadership and outside pressures which developed during UN consideration of the question, the necessary two-thirds majority in the General Assembly could not have been obtained... Not only is the US now confronted with the loss of... Arab goodwill, but it will be faced with a grave threat to US security and business interests as Arab resistance to partition increases... Only the USSR stands to gain by the partition plan’.

From these premises, the memorandum proceeded to urge institution of a UN trusteeship for Palestine, ‘pending agreement by the Arab and Jewish communities’. Alternatively, the United States should simply refrain from hav-
ing anything to do with the Partition Plan. In the meantime, the arms embargo should be maintained and enforced.

No attempt was made by the author of the memorandum to explain why the passage of two and a half weeks had made the Partition Plan less realizable than it had been when the US Ambassador to the United Nations had voted for it, at the behest of President Truman, on 29 November 1947. The partition scheme had not been tried and found wanting; it had not yet even been launched. In point of fact, nothing had occurred in the space of the intervening period which in any way vitiated the original assumptions underlying the partition proposal. Nor did the memorandum cite any new circumstances or unforeseen developments as grounds for its conclusion. Rather, the thrust of the argument was that American support for partition had been mistaken *ab initio*; that the President had, in fact, failed to perceive where the true interests of the nation lay before he committed the United States to supporting the plan; and that this misguided policy should be abandoned before it was too late. In depicting the serious consequences which might ensue if Washington persisted in supporting partition, the memorandum did not mention whether these consequences had been weighed by the President and discounted—surely a crucial aspect of the issue. Nor did the memorandum address itself to the possible domestic ramifications for President Truman if he were to make a sudden switch in a major issue of foreign policy. Nonetheless, this memorandum constituted but the ‘first shot’ in an exhaustive campaign to reverse the trend of America’s Palestine policy counter to the direction established by the President.

An illuminating insight into the trend prevalent among some higher-echelon State Department officials at that juncture may be found in the files of the British Foreign Office. At the turn of the year the Foreign Office asked the British Embassy in Washington whether, in its view, the United States would undertake mediation in Palestine based upon Jewish concessions ‘from the extreme position for which they have obtained United Nations support’. In response, the Embassy, on 5 January 1948 cabled that Denis Allen, having sounded out Loy Henderson very informally on the matter, reported Henderson’s position as follows:

‘He expressed the purely personal view, which he would not of course want quoted in any way, that it might be possible to secure some such action as you have in mind only after continued deterioration of situation in Palestine had led to reference of the matter to the Security Council. He had already been turning over in his own mind, but had not yet formulated or submitted to higher authority, possible alternative courses of action which United States Government might take in such event. He foresees that one of these courses—and the one he personally would prefer—might be that the opportunity should be taken to propose a new approach to the whole Palestine problem based upon suspension of the partition plan and possible extension of trusteeship scheme for Jerusalem to the whole of Palestine, pending further attempts at conciliation between Jews and Arabs’.

Shortly after these conversations, the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, under the direction of George F. Kennan, issued a major report (PPS/19), which recommended that the United States ‘take no further initiative in implementing or aiding partition’. Without the use of outside forces, the report contended, it would be impossible to enforce partition. But this meant either unilateral American military involvement in Palestine—something which was sure to arouse the wrath and antagonism of the entire Arab world—or else the equally disastrous prospect of a joint Russian-American expedition which would afford Moscow a grand opportunity to ensonce itself permanently in the heartland of the Middle East. ‘The presence of Soviet forces in Palestine’, it was said, ‘would constitute an out-flanking of our positions in Greece, Turkey and Iran and a potential threat to the stability of the entire Eastern Mediterranean area’.

The report recommended that the United States oppose the dispatch of any armed forces, including volunteers, to Palestine and it advocated continued enforcement of the arms embargo.

‘We should then take the position that we have been obliged to conclude that it is impracticable and undesirable for the inter-
national community to attempt to enforce any form of partition in the absence of agreement between the parties, and that the matter should go back to the UN General Assembly’. 17

Of course, the partition solution had been adopted precisely because it was impossible to bring the parties to an agreed solution. Thus, the Assembly, envisaging the possibility of strife, had recommended that national militias be created in the respective Jewish and Arab states and that the Security Council treat ‘any attempt to alter by force the settlement envisaged’ as a threat to the peace. All of this had been considered by President Truman when the United States voted for partition. No new circumstances that might have warranted the adoption of a fresh approach were noted in the report. The issues of oil and Soviet penetration of the area were not new; indeed, the supporters of partition had argued all along that it was only by means of whole-hearted American support for partition that US interests in the Middle East could be safeguarded. Obviously, these arguments had prevailed on the eve of the partition vote.

The link between US self-interest and partition was forcefully argued by Clark Clifford, Special Counsel to the President, in a memorandum which he submitted to Truman early in March 1948.

‘There are some who criticize your actions last fall in actively supporting partition in Palestine. They argue that this embarking the United States on a new policy; that this new policy involves military commitments which we are unable to perform; and that, therefore, we should seek some other solution. This argument is completely fallacious ... Had you failed to support partition, you would have been departing from an established American policy and justifiably subject to criticism. Partition unquestionably offers the best hope of a permanent solution of the Palestine problem that may avoid war. The policy of drift and delay urged by opponents of partition makes absolutely certain the very military involvements that they profess they want to avoid ... American self-interest, American military security, American interests in Middle East oil, and American prestige in international affairs all demand effective implementation of the UN Palestine decision. The most effective way to prevent Russian penetration into the Middle East and to protect vital American oil interests there is for the United States to take the immediate initiative in the Security Council to implement the General Assembly’s Palestine resolution’.

Clifford submitted to the President a ‘program of immediate action’ to ensure successful implementation of the partition decision. Among his recommendations were the following:

‘The United States should exert every pressure it can bring to bear upon the Arab States to accept partition. Strong pressures may already have been applied, but it does not look that way to the American people. Rather, there have been numerous examples of what appear to be acts of appeasement towards the Arabs ... The United States should take the initiative in branding the Arab States as aggressors and should move in the Security Council that Arab action constitutes a threat to the peace ... The United States should further call upon the Security Council to require Great Britain to comply with the General Assembly’s resolution ... The United States should immediately lift its unilateral embargo on arms to the Middle East ... This will give the Jewish militia and Hagana, which are striving to implement the UN decision, equal opportunity with the Arabs to arm for self-defence’.

Clifford rejected the claim that partition would not work. ‘This [claim] comes from those who never wanted partition to succeed and who have been determined to sabotage it. If anything has been omitted that could help kill partition, I do not know what it would be’. State Department officials, Clifford charged, have ‘made no attempt to conceal their dislike for partition’. He called, instead, for the United States ‘to back up’ the partition decision ‘in every possible way’.

In the meantime, a debate had arisen in the State Department itself over the propriety of Kennan’s proposal that the United States now abandon the partition solution for Palestine. Dean Rusk, head of the Office of United
Nations Affairs in the Department, argued that nothing new had developed which would warrant a revision of policy. He challenged the conclusions presented in PPS/19 in the following terms:

"Obviously a major change in our Palestine policy would require the approval of the President as well as of leading Members of Congress. The Planning Staff Paper does not appear to be complete enough to serve as the basis for such reconsideration. Specifically, it would need to deal with the following questions... (a) What events have occurred which create a "new situation" with respect to the action taken by the General Assembly on Palestine? Were not the considerations discussed in the attached paper known at the time of the decision to support the plan of the UNSCOP majority? (b) What has been done thus far by the Department of State... to increase the chances of success for the solution approved by us and by the General Assembly? (c) What steps could now be taken by the Department of State... to ensure maximum opportunity for the successful execution of the General Assembly recommendation on Palestine."  

While political recommendations need not be regarded as sacrosanct, to be pursued "at all costs", Rusk contended, nonetheless, the mere revival of earlier objections does not state a "new situation". A genuinely new situation might arise, according to Rusk, if, for example, the Security Council refused to accept its responsibilities under the resolution, if major civil war developed within Palestine, or if neighbouring Arab states invaded Palestine and the members of the United Nations refused to prevent the aggression. Since none of these had yet occurred, a basic reconsideration of the Assembly's resolution was unjustified. As to the powers of the Security Council in implementing partition, while Rusk asserted quite unequivocally that "armed intervention by the Arab States would clearly be aggression", he nevertheless admitted that, in the face of any such aggression, the Security Council was only competent to maintain international peace and security, and could not enforce a specific plan such as the partition scheme.

In response to the Rusk memorandum, Henderson argued that a new situation had indeed arisen as a result of Arab refusal to cooperate in implementation of partition (although, as noted, the resolution itself foresaw the prospect of obstructive tactics). Kennan regarded the situation in Palestine as fast approaching that state of civil war which, even according to Rusk, would represent a "new situation".

By 11 February 1948 it appears that Mr. Rusk had also reached the conclusion that a temporary international trusteeship for Palestine was called for. Only action by the Security Council could ensure implementation of partition; but, as noted earlier, Rusk considered the Council incompetent, on the basis of the UN Charter, to compel political settlements. Consequently, a return of the issue to the General Assembly for reconsideration was, in his opinion, essential.

By mid-February, State Department officials were engaged in drafting a major policy statement, to be delivered by Ambassador Warren Austin before the Security Council. The key feature of the statement would be the distinction enunciated by Rusk (and endorsed by the Legal Office) that "the Security Council is authorized to take forceful measures with respect to Palestine to remove a threat to international peace"; it is not, however, empowered "to enforce a political settlement". It would be up to the Security Council to determine if a threat to the peace existed. But, in any event, the Council's action would be directed "to keeping the peace and not to enforcing partition".

There was room to argue that the foregoing distinction was somewhat specious. Even conceding that the Security Council was powerless to enforce a political settlement (a thesis which had legal merit, but which had not gone unchallenged), in practical terms, given the circumstances of external aggression, any action by the Security Council to restore international peace and security would automatically facilitate implementation of the partition programme. In fact, Robert M. McClintock, Rusk's Special Assistant, made this very point in preparing the initial draft of the Austin speech. After enunciating the thesis regarding the limited powers of the Security Council in matters of political settlement, his draft in-
cluded a sentence, in brackets, to the following effect:

'It is undeniable, however, that the establishment of internal order in Palestine by the Security Council in pursuance of its duty to maintain international peace might establish conditions under which the Palestine Commission could succeed in carrying out its mandate according to the terms of the resolution of 29 November 1947'.

The implications of retaining or omitting the bracketed sentence, which he referred to as the watershed of the speech, were spelled out by McClintock as follows:

'If the sentence in brackets . . . is omitted, the speech in effect knocks the plan for the partition of Palestine in the head. If that sentence is retained, however, the speech comes out in favour of UN enforcement measures to partition Palestine'.

Secretary of State Marshall, who participated in the final drafting of the speech, apparently elected to drop this sentence, and, in effect, to knock partition on the head. Significantly, however, this was not the way the speech was portrayed to the President.

The first intimation about the proposed Austin statement was conveyed to Truman on 19 February 1948 by Under-Secretary Lovett. It was clearly a very general picture which the President received. In a memorandum describing the conversation, Lovett reported: 'The President assured me whatever course we consider the right one we could disregard all political factors . . . I gave him no idea of what our solution might be, but I did tell him of the careful approach you [Marshall] were making toward the reaching of a conclusion."

Two days later, on 21 February 1948, the State Department submitted to the President a 'working draft of [a] basic position paper' to provide an 'opportunity for consideration [of] fundamentals'. The covering letter pointed out that the draft had not yet been approved by Secretary Marshall or discussed with Secretary of Defense Forrestal and was thus very preliminary. In a separate and supplementary paragraph it was observed that, in the event that the Security Council could not give effect to the Assembly resolution, the matter would have to be referred back to a special session of the General Assembly with a view toward instituting some form of UN trusteeship. However, the paragraph in question was preceded by this covering sentence: 'The substance of the following . . . paragraph will not be discussed in Ambassador Austin's proposed speech but is submitted for the President's consideration and approval in relation to the further development of the problem'. Obviously enough, there was nothing in these final paragraphs which demanded an immediate response from the President. And, in fact, Truman's approval, conveyed on 22 February 1948, was carefully phrased, and defined with precision the exact limits of the authorization which the President was granting. It stated:

'Your working draft of recommended basic position for Security Council discussion Tuesday received. I approve in principle this basic position. I want to make it clear, however, that nothing should be presented to Security Council that could be interpreted as a recession on our part from the position we took in the General Assembly. Send final draft of Austin's remarks for my consideration'.

The next day Marshall submitted the final draft to the President, accompanied by the following message:

'This statement accurately reflects the policy which you have approved in principle in working paper submitted earlier: Austin's speech does not represent recession in any way from position taken by us in General Assembly. In fact, it is stronger with regard to threats to the peace which have developed since Assembly discussion. Those who may construe this as recession hold the incorrect view that Charter authorizes Security Council to impose recommendations by force'.

There is no firm evidence that Marshall saw McClintock's comment that the Austin speech had knocked partition on the head, but if, as is likely, he did, then Marshall was acting somewhat less than honestly in his statement to the President. Even if he did not see McClintock's comment, it is little less than astonishing that Marshall could have portrayed the speech as
being in conformity with the established American position in support of partition.

The argument regarding limited Council competence was but preliminary to the aim of abandoning partition completely. State Department strategy, as it evolved, called for pro-forma, tepid, American support for Security Council assumption of the implementary role envisaged for the Council by the Assembly’s partition resolution, with the inevitable failure of the Council to accept this responsibility, followed by a remand of the entire question to the General Assembly. On 25 February 1948, Austin followed up his speech with the submission of a draft resolution, whereby the Security Council would accept its responsibilities under the Assembly’s November resolution, ‘subject to the authority of the Security Council under the Charter’, and would act to preserve international peace and security. The Council would seek to determine whether in fact the situation in Palestine constitutes ‘a threat to international peace and security’ and to decide, accordingly, on appropriate action. That the State Department was not overly anxious to garner support in the Security Council for the US draft resolution, and that the Americans were merely ‘going through the motions’, becomes clear from the following memoranda:

On 14 February 1948, Mr Henry S. Villard presented the following paper, which had been agreed upon by the Policy Planning Staff, to the National Security Staff meeting:

‘When the United Nations Security Council considers the report of the UN Palestine Commission, the policy of the US should be to adhere to its position of support of the General Assembly resolution on Palestine. The State Department believes that, in the absence of pressure from the US Government, there would not be sufficient affirmative votes in the Security Council for its implementation. The US Delegation would be instructed not to exert any such pressure.’

On 26 February 1948, in conversation with Mr McClintock, Under-Secretary Lovett stated that:

‘The basic question confronting the Council was whether or not to accept the responsibilities which the Assembly sought to impose on it by the resolution of 29 November 1947. Now that we had introduced the Resolution, we should, of course, stick to it, but we should not be unduly concerned if our language was not adopted. Should the Council not accept our draft it was not incumbant . . . on the US Delegation to continue to “carry the ball.” . . . If it [the Council] decided not to accept the responsibilities imposed upon it by the Assembly, then clearly there was justification to call a special session to consider what to do next.’

The next day, 27 February 1948, Lovett and Rusk discussed the position which Austin should adopt in the Council debate. It was decided that:

‘Ambassador Austin should vote for Paragraph 1 [for the Council to accept the responsibility which the Assembly requested it to assume with regard to implementation of partition] but should not make any impassioned speeches in its defence. His remarks should be confined to restating quietly and clearly what had already been said in his address of 24 February [which distinguished between maintaining peace and enforcing settlements]. Mr Rusk interjected that the Delegation was under strong pressure from sideline advisers to become apoplectic in its approach but clearly understood the instructions from the Under-Secretary.’

The result was quite predictable. Without vigorous American backing, the US draft resolution was doomed to failure. Paragraph 1, the key to Security Council action on behalf of partition, received only five votes and therefore was not adopted. The road was now clear for the Palestine question to be referred back to the General Assembly. It could be explained to the President that, in the face of the Security Council refusal to act, there was no alternative—although no one would reveal to the President that it was largely as a result of State Department inertia that the requisite majority had not been secured. On 8 March 1948, Truman’s approval was obtained for a draft statement ‘for use if and when necessary’, which would propose that the ‘Security
Council . . . consider [a] recommendation’ to the General Assembly for the establishment of a temporary trusteeship in Palestine. It should be noted that the language of this draft statement was guarded, in that it did not necessarily envisage an American initiative in proposing trusteeship; this, presumably, would require fresh Presidential approval. Moreover, any such contingency was to come about only after all efforts to effect a conciliation had been exhausted. The primary step envisaged for the Council was that of taking ‘measures’ to ensure international peace and security. There is no indication that State Department officials portrayed the draft statement to Truman as a major new turn in American policy. Nor is there any sign that the President was made aware of the fact that, in approving the statement he was acceding to something he had opposed all along, namely a retreat from America’s commitment to the Partition Plan.33

Further, there is no evidence that the President was alerted to the possibility of adverse political comment over what many would regard as a dramatic reversal of what had been America’s Palestine policy since the Fall of 1947. Indeed, the President might still have assumed that the Security Council, even without formal adoption of Paragraph 1, would nonetheless act deliberately to maintain international peace and security in Palestine, thereby preserving the partition scheme. This, it seems, was Truman’s assumption when he met with Dr Chaim Weizmann on 18 March 1948, the day before Austin was due to announce his trusteeship proposal. Truman appears to have assured Weizmann that the United States would remain faithful to its commitment to support the Partition Plan. Obviously, he was quite unaware that Austin was to proclaim American abandonment of that plan on the very next day.

Truman was infuriated by the action of the State Department. In his view they had guilefully reversed the pro-partition line which he had set. Certainly, in his own mind he had given no authorization for any such dramatic change, and, worst of all, he was confronted with a fait accompli and could not undo the damage already done to his policy and his personal image. His feelings on this occasion were dramatically revealed by the entry in his diary for that day, 19 March 1948:

‘The State Department pulled the rug from under me today. I didn’t expect that would happen. In Key West, or enroute there from St. Croix, I approved the speech and statement of policy by Senator Austin to UN meeting. This morning I find that the State Department has reversed my Palestine policy. The first I know about it is what I see in the papers! Isn’t that hell? I am now in the position of a liar and a double crosser. I have never felt so in my life.

There are people on the third and fourth levels of the State Department who have always wanted to cut my throat. They’ve succeeded in doing it’.34

In summation, it may be said that the proposal to replace partition by a UN trusteeship was not the result of a sudden whim of the State Department which had sprung up overnight. Rather, it had been in the works ever since the Assembly passed the partition resolution. Indeed, Henderson had never abandoned his earlier opposition to partition and had consistently striven to bring about a nullification of America’s commitment to the Assembly decision. Having failed to block US support for partition in the Assembly, he never wavered in his campaign to jettison that programme. By the early part of the year he had apparently convinced the State Department heads, Under Secretary of State Lovett and Secretary of State Marshall, that partition must be abandoned. Nothing had occurred to vitiate the President’s policy line but the Department was now resolved to adopt a new line. In doing so, the Department had to overcome Presidential objections. This was to be achieved by demonstrating a lack of Security Council support for the partition programme. A change in policy was thus inevitable. But all along Truman had operated under the assumption that his overriding requirement, ‘that nothing should be presented to Security Council that could be interpreted as a recession on our part’ from partition, was being faithfully adhered to, and that none of the speeches which he approved would constitute a manifest reversal of his policy. That assumption had now been rudely shattered. It was not until 15 May 1948

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— the day on which Israel’s independence was proclaimed—that the President was able to reassert his stand in favour of the partition programme, when he acceded the Jewish state recognition barely 11 minutes after the independence proclamation was issued in Tel Aviv. US representatives at the United Nations were no less surprised by the President’s dramatic announcement than were their fellow delegates to the world body.\textsuperscript{35}

The Bernadotte Plan furnished the backdrop to the second major crisis in the relations between the President and the foreign-affairs bureaucracy. Count Folke Bernadotte was appointed UN Mediator for Palestine on 20 May 1948 and was given the function, inter alia, of promoting “a peaceful adjustment of the future situation of Palestine”. After one abortive attempt in June to produce a solution\textsuperscript{36} (which both sides rejected out of hand), Bernadotte, on 16 September 1948, came up with a new set of proposals entitled “conclusions on means of peaceful adjustment”. His suggestions involved a rather drastic revision of the territorial arrangements of the original Partition Plan. Chief among these was his proposal that Israel should surrender its claim to the relatively large area of the Negev in return for the more fruitful Western Galilee, which it had conquered that summer. Likewise, it was to forgo control of the Jerusalem corridor, which linked Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and the Coastal Plain. It should be recalled that Israel’s securing of this corridor in 1948 had saved the Jewish part of Jerusalem from collapse in the face of a siege by Transjordan’s Arab Legion. Bernadotte also recommended that the Arab-inhabited areas of Palestine, which were to form an independent Arab state under the Assembly plan, should instead be merged with Transjordan, given “the historical connection and common interests of Transjordan and Palestine”. The latter proposal was to be subject “to such frontier rectifications regarding other Arab states as may be found practicable and desirable”—presumably designed to allow satisfaction of Egyptian claims.

Considerable speculation has surrounded the emergence of the Bernadotte Plan. Some have alleged that the whole plan was drafted in London, confirmed in Washington, and merely issued in Rhodes, where Bernadotte maintained his headquarters.\textsuperscript{37} There is, however, no evidence to substantiate this claim or to question the Mediator’s authorship. It is, of course, true that Sir John Troutbeck of the British Foreign Office and Robert McClimotck of the American State Department secretly flew to Rhodes for talks with Bernadotte several days before the plan was completed.\textsuperscript{38} While it is clear that these two officials introduced some modifications into the Mediator’s proposals, all this only amounted to providing the minor finishing touches to a plan which Bernadotte had worked out independently. The identity of views on how best to resolve the Palestine problem was not a result of last-minute intervention, but rather was the product of a lengthy process of consultation and discussion between the Mediator, Washington, and London. Bernadotte had long maintained that any scheme which did not have the approval and support of the British and American governments would be quite unworkable. Thus, his plan, while independently conceived and largely independently drafted, also reflected British and American thinking.

Regardless of the role to be ascribed to London and Washington in the drafting of the proposals, it is well documented that the two governments concerted plans in advance for imposing the new terms on the parties to the Palestine conflict.\textsuperscript{39} For the British, the essential point was that Israel would be “cut down to size”, with the Negev and the Jerusalem corridor going to the Arabs. In return, Israel would occupy a compact area which, with the exception of the Galilee, would be concentrated along the coast. This diminutive state, the British maintained, would be inherently non-expansionist and hence more acceptable to the Arabs than the “extensive” hourglass-shaped territory contemplated by the General Assembly.\textsuperscript{40} Presenting the Negev to Transjordan would also satisfy British defence needs in the area, since it would provide access from the Mediterranean via Gaza.\textsuperscript{41} British and American co-operation in enforcing the plan would restore the vital partnership between the two great Allies which had founded in the post-war years over the question of Palestine. Thus, in the West’s confrontation with the Soviet Union there would now be an identity
of approach, not only to questions arising in Europe, but also with reference to the Middle East. This scheme for concerted action conformed both to the spirit and to the substance of the Pentagon Talks conducted in Washington in late 1947 by British and American officials. The strategy for implementing the Mediator’s proposals was worked out by Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and Secretary of State George Marshall in a series of messages during the three weeks from the end of August until mid-September, when the report was issued.

Prior to the issuance of the report the British were to contact the Arab governments and urge them to ‘acquiesce’ in the proposals, and the Americans were to do likewise with Israel. The term ‘acquiesce’ was used advisedly, since it was not believed that either side would accept the proposals, but only that each would abide by them if so compelled. Washington and London would then endorse the proposals publicly and the imprimatur of the United Nations (Security Council or General Assembly) would be sought. Confirmation roughly of the cease-fire line as the new international boundary between the parties was the key to the whole scheme, and it was agreed that no significant deviation from that line would be sanctioned by the British and American governments.

It was decided that Secretary Marshall would launch the campaign for implementation of Bernadotte’s proposals, proclaiming America’s unreserved endorsement of the plan. This was to be followed the next day by an announcement in a similar vein by Foreign Minister Bevin before the House of Commons. On 21 September 1948, Secretary Marshall made the following announcement:

‘The US considers that the conclusions contained in the final report of Count Bernadotte offer a generally fair basis for settlement of the Palestine question. My government is of the opinion that the conclusions are sound and strongly urges the parties and the General Assembly to accept them in their entirety as the best possible basis for bringing peace to a distracted land’.

The White House was informed of the text of the proposed statement the same day—hardly extensive advance notice. No express approval of the President was obtained before issuance of the statement. Moreover, no one in the State Department seems to have queried whether the new policy statement was in harmony with the President’s previous endorsement of the General Assembly’s Partition Plan, an endorsement which had been reconfirmed in the Democratic Party platform of 14 July. In fact, that platform had stipulated that ‘modification’ in the boundaries ‘should be made only if fully acceptable to the State of Israel’. The President’s election campaign was geared to the Democratic Party platform. Truman appears to have been quite uninformed about the nature and import of the Foreign Office/State Department talks on concerted Palestine policy and the extent to which the joint approach depended on full implementation of the Bernadotte Plan. When Truman received the first intimation regarding co-ordination of policy with the British, such co-ordination was already well advanced. On 31 August 1948, Secretary of State Marshall submitted a draft letter to the President (addressed to the US Special Representative to Israel, James G. McDonald) which, it was proposed, would serve as a basic policy document on the Palestine question. In a covering letter, Marshall suggested that the State Department inform London of the contents of the letter. He went on to say that:

‘It seems probable that the question of Palestine will be placed before the United Nations General Assembly in September and it is essential that US and UK policy be co-ordinated before that time. Likewise it would be of great advantage if the two governments could concert a line of policy with the United Nations Mediator, Count Bernadotte, whose views on a territorial settlement are very similar to those set forth in the attached draft telegram [to McDonald].’

The Message sent to McDonald, dated 1 September 1948, contained the following passage:

‘The US feels that the new State of Israel should have boundaries which will make it more homogeneous and well-integrated than the hourglass frontiers drawn on the map of
the November 29 Resolution. Perhaps some solution can be worked out as part of any settlement with Transjordan which would materially simplify boundary problem. Specifically, it would appear to us that Israel might expand into the rich area of Galilee, which it now holds in military occupation, in return for relinquishing a large portion of the Negev to Transjordan. This would leave the new State with materially improved frontiers and considerably enriched in terms of natural resources by acquisition of Galilee in return for the desert Negev.

Truman approved the message to McDonald the same day.

Nowhere in these communications to the President was there much more than a hint about the lengthy and laboured talks that had gone on with the British with a view to utilizing the Bernadotte proposals as an instrument to impose a settlement, compelling Israel to surrender its claim to the Negev. At most there was a suggestion for ‘tidying up’ the boundary situation through some form of quid pro quo; but essentially, it would be up to Israel to determine whether or not it wanted to make the switch of the Western Galilee for the Negev. It is worth recalling that when the partition scheme had been initially considered in 1947, the President had vetoed a State Department proposal to sever the Negev from the Jewish State. Therefore, he could hardly have assumed that in 1948, after Israel was established, the State Department would commit the United States to a British proposal which would effect what he had rejected in 1947. Marshall’s announcement on 21 September, therefore came as a complete surprise to the President.

Truman’s response was drastic and dramatic. After criticism began mounting that the Truman Administration was once again switching its policy on Palestine, the President, on 29 September 1948, sat down and drafted a letter to Marshall in his own handwriting, as follows:

‘Your statement that the Bernadotte report should be used as a basis for negotiation in the settlement of the Palestine question requires clarification.

The government of the United States is on record as having endorsed the action of the United Nations General Assembly of November 1947 as to boundaries. As President I have stated so officially. The Democratic Platform endorsed the findings of the General Assembly.

I shall have to state that my position as to boundaries has not changed.

You should know that my statement will be made on October first.’

When Clark Clifford informed Lovett of the message which the President intended sending to Marshall (then in Paris), Lovett, with the support of State Department colleagues, demurred strongly:

‘I told Clifford that the consequences of a telegram indicating a reversal of the President’s clear approval of a programme discussed with him by the Secretary on September 1 and signed by the President on that date would put the Secretary in an intolerable position and, because of the agreements made with countries in the light of the agreed policy [presumably Great Britain], would label this country as violating its agreements and as completely untrustworthy in international affairs. Clifford said this was all news to him.’

Lovett’s arguments prevailed, and the President was dissuaded from dispatching his message. However, Lovett’s remarks raise more questions than they answer. For, was it not the State Department itself which was being untrustworthy in conniving with the British Foreign Office to undermine the firm and declared policy of the head of government? The McDonald letter approved by the President, to which Lovett alluded, in no way suggested the dramatic reversal in policy which the State Department had been preparing. The President, as the evidence reveals, was quite unprepared for the momentous announcement of his Secretary of State.

In his talk with White House adviser, Clark Clifford, Lovett also claimed that a message containing the text of Marshall’s proposed statement had been ‘sent to the President through the White House Signal Center and dispatched at 4.18 p.m. on September 18 . . . and asking for instructions if the President were [sic] not in agreement produced no reply to
date. At 6.20 on Monday evening, September 20, the White House Signal Center was checked with and again on Tuesday morning the 21st. No reply had been received in any form.50 Yet, given the revolutionary nature of the proposed statement and its possibly serious impact both domestically and internationally, was it sufficient for an officer of the government to simply rely on the absence of any reaction before issuing such a statement? Was it not necessary to obtain a clear-cut, categorical approval from the Chief Executive, perhaps even after a personal meeting, before a major element in America’s Middle East policy was revised?

It is clear that members of the State Department were aware of the possibility that moves to compel Israel to forgo the Negev might meet with presidential disapproval. This becomes evident from the following exchanges. In reporting to Lovett on his Rhodes meeting with Bernadotte and Troutbeck, preparatory to the issuance of the Mediator’s proposals, Mc Clintock noted:

‘Principal matter of substance upon which views of Bernadotte and UK were at variance with our own was whether Israel should be given even a token salient into Negev, such as our suggestion for a projection of Israeli territory south to Beersheba–Gaza road. British proposed southern frontier terminate at latitude of Majdal and found firm support from Mediator . . . I told Bernadotte that I would recommend that Department support his proposals in their entirety, including his suggestion of Majdal–Faluja line as southern boundary of Israel. I made it clear, however, that this recommendation was in no way binding on US government, that Negev was a question of much political importance to Jews, and that it might eventually be politically good judgement to give Israel a token holding in that area (I think, however, that from point of impartial equity Bernadotte is right).’51

The British records reveal even more clearly that during his talks at Rhodes, Mc Clintock realized that in considering the possible detachment of the Negev from Israel, the State Department was not acting fully in accordance with the President’s wishes. Reporting to Bevin, Troutbeck noted:

‘Mc Clintock throughout called attention to the strong mystical feeling now felt by the Jews for the Negev. Dr Weizmann in particular is obsessed by this idea. While therefore Mc Clintock will himself recommend to the State Department that they support the Mediator’s suggestions to give the whole of the Negev to the Arabs, he thinks it quite possible that the White House will intervene, as it apparently did on an earlier occasion. Mc Clintock threw out the personal idea that should this happen it might be possible to trade a slice of the Negev against a slice of the Galilee for Syria’.52

In the aftermath of Truman’s near disavowal of Marshall, Mc Clintock cabled Dean Rusk (then in Paris) as follows 53:

‘I do want to suggest for your consideration the probability that we shall have to adjust our sights at least to the point of agreeing that the territorial recommendations of the Mediator be modified in favour of Israel to the extent of giving the Jewish State a salient into the Negev, which would include most, if not all, of the Jewish settlements in that area. Such a salient would not extend further than the Gaza–Beersheba Road and would in fact put us in precise accord with the proposed territorial settlement which was approved by the President on September 1’.

The italicised passage establishes quite clearly that Mc Clintock fully appreciated that Marshall’s endorsement of the Mediator’s proposals ‘in their entirety went beyond the authorization which the President had given. (This, of course, leaves to one side the further question as to whether Truman had ever assented to compelling Israel to surrender any part of the Negev). But perhaps the most revealing document is the message cabled to London from Paris by the British delegate to the United Nations on 20 September 1948. It reads as follows:

‘My immediate following telegram contains the text of a statement which Mr Marshall has decided to issue in Paris at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, September 21st.

2. In telegraphing this text to Washington
Mr Marshall will simply state that he is releasing it at the time indicated above. The Delegation consider that this should prevent any attempt in Washington to alter the policy or procedure but they warn us that there is still a slight chance that something may go wrong.\(^54\)

This document tends to confirm that members of the State Department were less than candid when they presented the issue of the Bernadotte Plan to the President. They never revealed the full measure of the concessions to the British position which they had made and were prepared to make. They mentioned that talks had gone on between Washington and London, but they never spelled out the details of the discussions or their full implications for the integrity of the Partition Plan. And, when the time came for the United States to announce its stand on the Bernadotte Plan, they perfunctorily submitted the proposed text to the White House, hoping that it would slip by without anyone realizing the significance of the announcement.

As noted, Truman was dissuaded from issuing the announcement which would have repudiated Marshall's support for the Bernadotte Plan. Nonetheless, subsequent developments afforded the President an opportunity to reverse the State Department stand, in this case, no less than in the instance of the trusteeship proposal. On the eve of the presidential elections in November, the Republican candidate, Thomas E. Dewey, issued a statement which implicitly charged the Truman Administration with abandonment of the essentials of the partition scheme and of being intent on coercing Israel to surrender the Negev.\(^55\) Truman responded with alacrity and proclaimed that he stands "squarely on the provisions covering Israel in the Democratic Platform" which stipulated that modifications in the partition boundaries "should be made only if fully acceptable to the State of Israel".\(^56\) After his election victory Truman, in a letter to President Chaim Weizmann of Israel, wrote:

'I remember well our conversation about the Negev . . . I fully agree with your estimate of the importance of the area to Israel, and I deplore any attempt to take it away from Israel. I had thought that my position would have been clear to all the world, particularly in the light of the specific wording of the Democratic Party platform. But there were those who did not take this seriously, regarding it as "just another campaign promise" to be forgotten after the election. I believe they have recently realized their error."\(^57\)

The episodes examined here raise serious questions regarding the good faith and bureaucratic ethics of State Department officials in these two instances. There seems little doubt that in both cases—the question of trusteeship for Palestine and the matter of implementation of the Bernadotte proposals—these officials realized that the plans they were promoting were not consonant with the policy set by the President. President Truman had a firm commitment to implement the Partition Plan and wished to see it through—by means short of directly involving the United States in war. Clifford and other White House advisers were convinced that it was in the national interest of the United States to strengthen the United Nations and to ensure faithful execution of the partition resolution. In this manner, both Arab belligerency and Soviet intervention would be forestalled. The President, apparently accepting this interpretation of how best to serve the national interest, opted for a policy line which was highly imprudent in the eyes of certain top echelon officials in the State Department bureaucracy. Their assessment of what the US "national interest" required with respect to Palestine in 1948 differed radically from that of President Truman, and they were determined to continue to challenge the President's line so as to induce a reversal, or at least a modification, of the decisions taken. It is arguable that, as foreign policy advisers, these State Department officials were obligated to try to "set the President's mind straight" and to deflect him from a course which seemed to them perilous with consequences. However, the manner in which they pursued their goals is more open to criticism. As has been seen, they were never sufficiently candid with the President; they failed to keep him informed of crucial moves and decisions, such as the decision to support partition in only a lukewarm manner in the Security Council; and, even more, they conducted secret discussions with the British on
how best to enforce the Bernadotte Plan. By their actions the State Department bureaucrats exposed themselves to the grave charge of attempting to dictate policy to the elected official, their nominal superior, and thus to violate the democratic process.

No doubt these State Department officials were convinced that the special circumstances of 1948, a presidential election year, accorded them greater than usual licence to maintain American foreign policy 'on an even keel' and to prevent such policy from being buffeted by the winds of domestic and ethnic politics. In their view it was a serious mistake, and perhaps even a tragic one, to allow the conduct of foreign policy to be subject to such pressures. This, of course, was in line with the strong 'elitist' bias of the State Department, and raises fundamental questions regarding decision making in the sphere of foreign policy. As has been aptly noted, the concept of 'national interest' is a relative one. In a democracy, the thesis that the version of the national interest accepted by the 'philosopher-kings' in the Department of State should prevail over the views of the electorate, or of a significant segment of it, is not readily sustainable.

NOTES

5. Ibid. pp. 1153-1158.
6. Realizing how far he had gone in opposing administration policy, Henderson felt compelled to pen the following aside to Secretary Marshall: 'I wish to assure you that, in spite of the views expressed in this memorandum, the staff of my office is endeavoring loyally to carry out the decision to support partition . . . and, unless informed otherwise by you, will continue to endeavor to execute that decision which will minimize as far as possible the damage to our relations in the Near and Middle East'. Ibid. p. 1158, n. 1.
10. Ibid. p. 1278.
13. Ibid. p. 1278. Also noted is that the United States was entitled to disregard the UNSCOP report (and the Assembly partition resolution based thereon), since, among other reasons, 'it now seems clear that some members of the Committee (UNSCOP) while in Palestine were effectively "taken into camp" by various means, both ethical and unethical, resorted to by the Jewish Agency'. Dept. of State Decimal File, 501.BB Palestine/12-1747.
15. FRUS 1948, pp. 546-54.
16. Ibid. p. 551.
20. Ibid. p. 557.
21. Ibid. p. 600.
23. The legal adviser of the UN Secretariat maintained that Security Council possessed the legal authority to partition Palestine by force. See N.Y. Times, 9 March 1948 and FRUS 1948, pp. 700-701. This was also the view set forth by former Counsellor of the Department of State, Benjamin V. Cohen, in a series of articles in the New York Herald Tribune, 16 and 17 March 1948. See also Clark Clifford, paper, 'Truman's Decision to Support Partition', pp. 10-11.
25. Ibid. p. 633.
27. Ibid. pp. 639-640.
28. Ibid. p. 645.
31. Ibid. p. 660.
32. Ibid. p. 663.
33. For the text of the document approved by the President see FRUS 1948, pp. 680-681 (see also p. 697). The document clearly indicates that the Security Council was regarded only as a last resort to be considered by the Security Council for recommendation to the General Assembly. In this connection, see ibid. pp. 745 and 754. But cf. subsequent statement by Lovett, ibid. p. 749.
34. See in Margaret Truman, Harry S. Truman (N.Y., 1972), pp. 424-25. For further discussion of Truman's reactions, see Donovan, Conflict and Crisis, pp. 373-377 and Ganal, 'America's Retreat from Partition', pp. 20-24.
37. See Lovett's memorandum to Truman, 24 September 1948, FRUS 1948, p. 1420. See also N.Y. Times, 17 October 1948.
38. FRUS 1948, pp. 1387, 1390-1390.
40. Ibid. pp. 1269-1270.
41. On British defence interests in this regard, see ibid. pp. 1571, 1680-1683.
42. FRUS 1947, pp. 1 ff.
43. See FRUS 1948, pp. 1358-1359, 1365-1369, 1371-1375, 1381-1382, 1388-1389, 1394-1397, 1399-1400.
44. See ibid. pp. 1267-1268, 1289, 1304, 1310, 1343, 1355-1357, 1372, 1382, 1396.
45. Ibid. pp. 1415-1416. Lovett conveyed a copy of the announcement to Clifford on the same day. Ibid. n. 1.
46. Ibid. pp. 1367-1368.
47. FRUS 1947, pp. 1269-1271.
49. Ibid. pp. 1430-1431.
50. Idem. The edition of FRUS notes that no copy of an advance text was found in the records of the State Department.
51. FRUS 1948, p. 1431, n. 1.
52. Ibid. p. 1388.
56. See FRUS 1948, pp. 1507-1508, and comment of Clifford, ibid. p. 1509.
57. See full text, ibid. pp. 1512-1513.