

The U.S. and Gen. Aidid: Meaning in the Madness

Your Dec. 3 editorial "Surviving American Logic" wondered aloud how leading Middle East figures of diverse reputation would regard the "bizarre and unseemly" story that U.S. military forces had transported Somali strongman Mohamed Farrah Aidid, under their protection, to Addis Ababa for negotiations. America's new affection for "Aidid logic," you say, although laughable, "keeps getting people killed." Israel beware.

My reactions to this news story were somewhat different. Yes, it was surprising to see our forces sheltering Aidid, in light of the U.S. and U.N. blood his militiamen have spilled. My first thought was unbridled admiration for the professionalism of U.S. military forces, who undoubtedly swallowed strong personal feelings to carry out orders from the chain of command. What a superior example to others.

My second reaction was admiration that the Clinton administration had braved predictable criticisms such as yours to give political negotiations every chance of success. Will it work? I don't know; but does anyone think a stable, viable long-term order in Somalia can be created without a political negotiation among the main clans? The U.N. is investigating the killings of its peacekeepers, and in time, Aidid's culpability may well be established. The plane ride does not change this.

As for Mr. Rabin, I should think he would welcome the sight of U.S. troops serving as Aidid's "bodyguards." This places him in good company, as Israel copes with the new reality that its arch enemy Arafat is now its main ally against all who would block peace. Most Americans are humbled by Israel's ability to act with vision despite all the PLO has done against it. Unless one has advanced a comparable vision to resolve the crisis in Somalia, one ought to leaven his or her criticisms with a measure of humility.

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Surviving American Logic

We'd be curious to know how the following news story yesterday was interpreted around the Middle East by Saddam Hussein, Hafez Assad, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, to name only a few. As reported by the Associated Press:

"Somali Strongman Leaves on U.S. Army Plane. MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — Somali strongman Mohamed Farrah Aidid left today on a U.S. army plane to the Ethiopian capital for talks with his rivals, avoiding United Nations facilities and protected by American security forces."

We guess one thing these men would conclude is that U.S. government officials believe that if they can't win on the battlefield, they can always talk their way to victory.

We note this bizarre and unseemly turn in the Aidid story, because Secretary of State Warren Christopher arrives in the Middle East today to work the details of the peace agreement between Israel and the PLO. The Israeli people may reasonably hope that the result of these American efforts turn out better for them than they have for Mogadishu.

Followers of the daily news will note that the Mideast peace accord has been characterized by riots and murder in Gaza and on the West Bank. Hamas, currently the most murderous Palestinian faction, has put its folks on order to kill Israeli soldiers and settlers. At least 13 Israelis have died since the agreement's Rose Garden signing in September. Hamas's courageous drive-by shooters gunned down a kindergarten teacher Wednesday. Palestinians have also died in fighting.

Relatedly, an aspect of the peace agreement that disturbs many Israelis has to do with the creation of a 15,000-

person Palestinian police force for the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank. It develops that Mr. Arafat has been staffing up this force, quite openly, with members of the Palestinian Liberation Army. They'll have automatic weapons and armored vehicles. This strikes us as a little strange, but again, we live in an age of Aidid logic.

In fact, there isn't too much reality that has ever gotten in the way of an American diplomat in pursuit of a peace document. For example, one of the venues in which Mr. Christopher will pursue peace is Damascus, Syria, which is run by an Alawite dictatorship under the direction of Hafez Assad. Having achieved "peace" with the PLO, the current American logic is that it's now time to bring Mr. Assad onboard. Mr. Assad will live on in our historical memory as the man who in 1982, suppressed an uprising in the city of Hama by sending in the Syrian army, which executed at least 20,000 people.

Mr. Assad's price for peace is Israeli evacuation of the Golan Heights, which they got in the 1967 war. Israelis have always felt the Golan Heights were important as an early-warning post for the approximately eight hours they'd have to respond to forward movement by Mr. Assad's huge tank army. Mr. Christopher will work this issue for Assad, and it certainly wouldn't surprise us if it was suggested that for some interim period American "peacekeepers" would patrol the Golan Heights. Remember, anything's possible in a world in which American soldiers serve as bodyguards for Gen. Aidid.

Aidid logic may be laughable, but it keeps getting people killed. But we assume someone in Israel knows that.