

Olmert's Poodle

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Global Research, January 18, 2009

American Conservative 18 February 2009

Region: [USA](#)

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As Israel entered the third week of its Gaza blitz, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert regaled a crowd in Ashkelon with an astonishing tale.

He had, said Olmert, whistled up George Bush, interrupted him in the middle of a speech and told him to instruct Condi Rice not to vote for a U.N. resolution Condi herself had written. Bush did as told, said Olmert.

The crowd loved it. Here is the background.

After intense negotiations with Britain and France, Secretary of State Rice had persuaded the Security Council to agree on a resolution calling for a cease-fire. But Olmert wanted more time to kill Hamas.

So, here, in Olmert's words, is what happened next.

"In the night between Thursday and Friday, when the secretary of state wanted to lead the vote on a cease-fire at the Security Council, we did not want her to vote in favor.

"I said, 'Get me President Bush on the phone.' They said he was in the middle of giving a speech in Philadelphia. I said I didn't care. 'I need to talk to him now.' He got off the podium and spoke to me.

According to Olmert, Bush was clueless.

"He said: 'Listen. I don't know about it. I didn't see it. I'm not familiar with the phrasing.'"

"I told him the United States could not vote in favor. It cannot vote in favor of such a resolution. He immediately called the secretary of state and told her not to vote in favor. ...

"She was left shamed. A resolution that she prepared and arranged, and in the end she did not vote in favor."

The U.N. diplomatic corps was astonished when the United States abstained on the 14-0 resolution Rice had crafted and claimed her country supported. Arab diplomats say Rice promised them she would vote for it.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack, with Rice at the United Nations during the debate on the resolution, said Olmert's remarks were "just 100 percent, totally, completely untrue."

But the White House cut Rice off at the knees, saying only that there were "inaccuracies" in

the Olmert story. The video does not show Bush interrupting his speech to take any call.

Yet the substance rings true and is widely believed, and Olmert is happily describing the egg on Rice's face:

"He (Bush) gave an order to the secretary of state, and she did not vote in favor of it — a resolution she cooked up, phrased, organized and maneuvered for. She was left pretty shamed. ..."

With Bush and Rice leaving office in hours, and Olmert in weeks, the story may seem to lack significance.

Yet public gloating by an Israeli prime minister that he can order a U.S. president off a podium and instruct him to reverse and humiliate his secretary of state may cause even Ehud's poodle to rise up on its hind legs one day and bite its master.

Taking such liberties with a superpower that, for Israel's benefit, has shoveled out \$150 billion and subordinated its own interests in the Arab and Islamic world would seem a hubristic and stupid thing to do.

And there are straws in the wind that, despite congressional resolutions giving full-throated approval to all that Israel is doing in Gaza, this is becoming a troubled relationship.

Two weeks ago, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, in opposing any truce, assured the world there "is no humanitarian crisis in the (Gaza) Strip," and the humanitarian situation there "is completely as it should be."

Not so to Hillary Clinton. In her confirmation hearings, the secretary of state-designate, reports the New York Times, "struck a sharper tone toward Israel on violence in the Middle East."

Clinton "seemed to part from the tone set by the Bush administration in calling attention to what she described as the 'tragic humanitarian costs' borne by Palestinians, as well as Israelis."

More dramatic was a weekend report by the Times' David Sanger that the White House had rebuffed Olmert's request for new U.S. bunker-buster bombs and denied Israel permission to overfly Iraq in any strike on Iran's nuclear enrichment plant at Natanz.

Sanger described these U.S.-Israeli talks as "tense."

Repeatedly, Israel has warned that Iran is close to a bomb and threatened to attack unilaterally. Indeed, Israel simulated such an attack in an air exercise of 100 planes that went as far as Greece.

Bush both blocked and vetoed that attack, says Sanger. But he did assure Olmert that America is engaged in the sabotage of Iran's nuclear program by helping provide Tehran with defective parts.

This would seem a stunning breach of security secrets, but no outrage has been heard from the White House, nor has any charge come that the Times compromised national security.

With Olmert, Rice, and Bush departing, and Obama and Hillary taking charge committed to talking to Iran, can the old intimacy survive the new friction and colliding agendas?

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