



By Herbert C. Kelman

THE administration's decision to suspend the dialogue with the Palestinian Liberation Organization is a serious and dangerous error, which can be rectified only by an early offer to resume the dialogue with a broader mandate, accompanied by a clear restatement of United States policy.

The decision is dangerous because it puts an end to even the halting peace process that the US has been trying to promote in the Middle East and thereby increases the expectation and probability of a new war – not necessarily by design, but as a result of escalatory rhetoric and violent actions that can easily get out of

end to the process that it had been hoping to scuttle. It also provided further confirmation to the view in some Israeli circles that US criticism of Israel is meant as a sop to Arab countries, European allies, and domestic constituencies and need not be taken at face value.

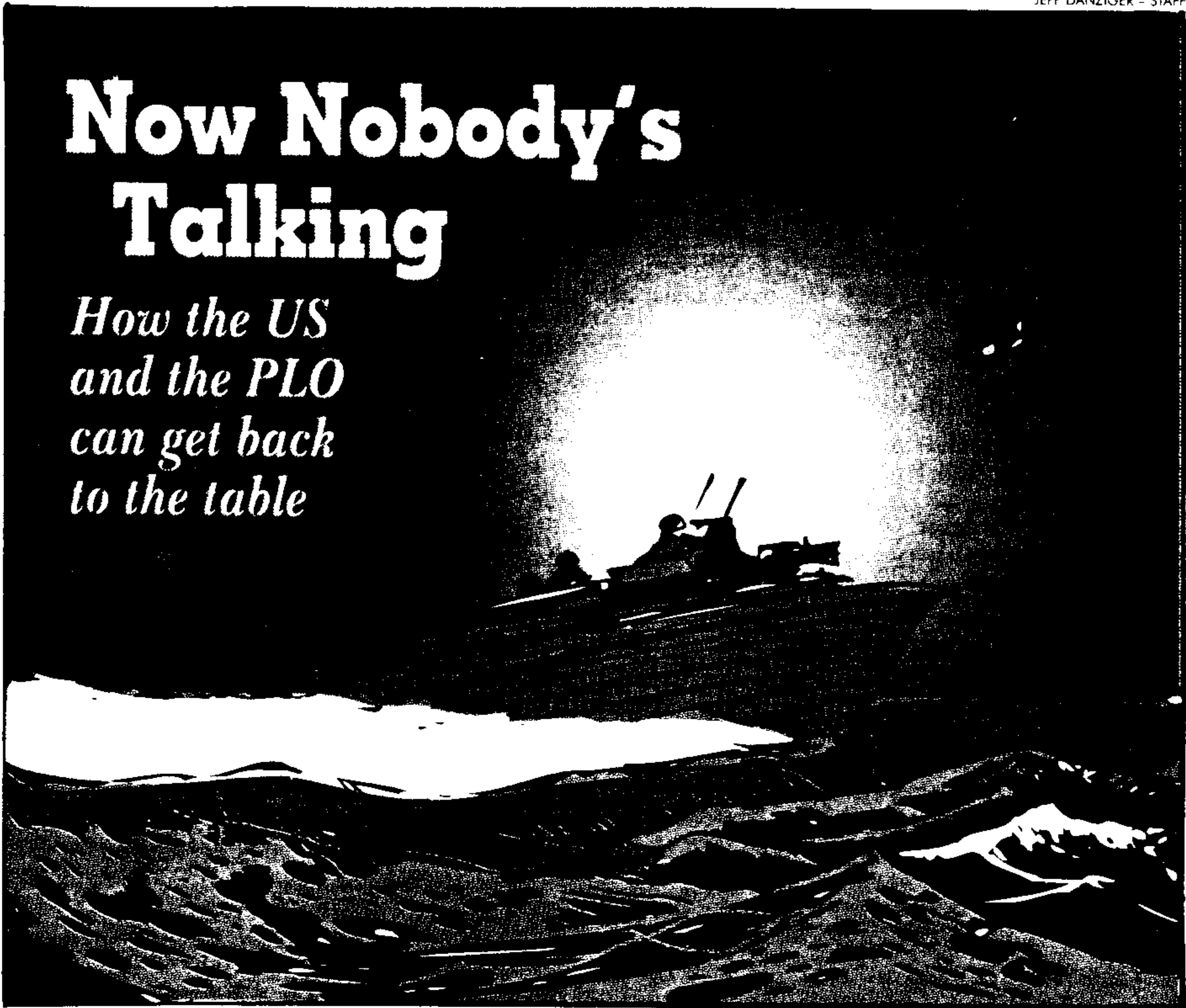
The other winners in the US decision to suspend the dialogue with the PLO were Abul-Abbas and his fellow Palestinian opponents to Chairman Yasser Arafat's peace initiative. They succeeded in achieving the probable purpose of the attempted raid on the Israeli coast on May 30: the scuttling of the nascent peace process. They also demonstrated their power to undermine future peace efforts by mounting terrorist actions and thereby gaining control over US policy.

The issue is not US policy to-

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## Now Nobody's Talking

How the US and the PLO can get back to the table



hand. Suspending the US-PLO dialogue excludes the PLO from the indirect role in the election plan for the occupied territories that has been the minimal condition for any Palestinian participation. There is now no prospective process into which the US can coax the new Israeli government.

Secretary of State James Baker recently chided the Israeli government in sarcastic terms for its failure to move toward negotiations. Though one might question his language and tone, the message he conveyed was justified and necessary. But words are meant to serve as a prelude to action, not a substitute for it. In suspending the US-PLO dialogue, the administration's actions in effect nullified its words. The suspension rewarded the Shamir government for its stalling tactics and gave it what it wanted: an

ward terrorism, which is one of the forms of violence that cannot be countenanced even in a world that, unfortunately, still considers organized violence a legitimate means of pursuing national objectives. The issue is the conduct of foreign policy with maximal flexibility, effectiveness, and adherence to principle. By these criteria, the way the US-PLO dialogue was structured from the beginning can only be described as highly unprofessional. Under constraint from Congress, the administration has boxed in the dialogue with conditions that reduced its effectiveness and made it vulnerable to the maneuvers of Palestinian rejectionists and Israeli restrainers.

The opening of the dialogue in December of 1988 was a policy decision, based on the judgment that the PLO was an essential

partner in any realistic peace process and that the PLO leadership under Arafat was prepared to engage itself seriously in that process. Neither the attempted raid of May 30, nor Arafat's failure to respond to it in the precise form that the administration scripted for him, change the wisdom of the original policy decision or the validity of the judgments on which it was based.

The raid and the PLO response to it demonstrate two unfortunate realities: that Arafat is not in total control of the actions of all of the groupings that constitute the PLO; and that he is constrained by the declining support among Palestinians, inside and outside the occupied territories, for his peace initiative. Public support for the PLO peace initiative has faded because many Palestinians have concluded (prematurely, in my view) that it has failed. They have seen no reciprocation by the Israeli government of fundamental concessions that the Palestinian leadership has made; and even the one visible success of the PLO initiative – the now-suspended dialogue with the US – has turned out to be more of a charade than a forum for substantive discussion.

There is no question that the peace process would be stronger if there were no terrorist actions or if the PLO were prepared to condemn and punish such actions specifically and unequivocally. It would also be stronger if there were an Israeli government that was prepared to stop settlement activities in the occupied territories, to reduce the level of violence against Palestinians, and to commit itself to peace on the basis of a historic compromise. But US policy must be based on an assessment of the political realities on the ground, including the constraints under which political leaders operate. Such an assessment suggests that the PLO remains a necessary partner to a peace process, that Arafat remains committed to his undertakings of December 1988, and that his leadership of the PLO – constrained as it is – still offers the best hope for negotiating a mutually satisfactory Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Under the circumstances, the US policy objective of promoting a viable peace process required us to continue the dialogue with the PLO – and indeed to upgrade it – and thus to strengthen the hands of the pro-negotiation elements in the Palestinian community and the Arab world. Conditioning the continuation of the dialogue on the PLO's adherence to a specific set of words and actions dictated by the US was tactically unwise and symptomatic of a flawed relationship. The dialogue was an instrument of US policy, not a favor to the PLO. Within such a relationship, the appropriate US reaction would have been to communicate to the PLO that the May 30 raid has made the dialogue po-

litically embarrassing, and to propose a joint search for a mutually acceptable formula to continue the dialogue.

How can the damage be repaired? First, the administration should start now – through quiet diplomacy, probably with the help of unofficial contacts – to consult with Arafat about the circumstances under which the dialogue can be resumed. Through such consultations, it should be possible to identify steps the PLO feels able to take, short of yielding to US ultimatums, that would allow the administration to declare that its conditions for resuming the dialogue have been met.

Second, the resumption of the dialogue should be viewed as an opportunity to redefine its purpose, upgrading both its content and the level of its participants. The temporary suspension of US-PLO talks will have served a constructive function if its resumption is used to signal a new commitment to the dialogue as a forum for serious exchange on substantive issues. The dialogue must move beyond its previous role as a symbol and an opportunity to moderate the PLO, and become a venue for exploring Palestinian requirements and their ideas about the process and outcome of negotiations.

Third, resumption of the dialogue should be accompanied by a clear and full restatement of American policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The statement should include those positions to which the US has been committed for a long time, such as: Search for a solution that assures both Israeli security and Palestinian political rights; adherence to a land-for-peace formula; opposition to Israeli settlements in the occupied territories; and having the status of Jerusalem determined in the course of peace negotiations.

THE statement should also add, however, an essential point that has so far been lacking in US policy: an acknowledgment that a fair and lasting solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be based on recognition of the *nationhood* of both peoples and the right of *both* to national self-determination in the land that they share. Moreover, a restatement of US policy should make clear that a peace process cognizant of Palestinian nationhood cannot exclude the PLO, drive a wedge between Palestinians in the occupied territories and those outside, or rule out the establishment – through negotiations – of a Palestinian state in peaceful coexistence with the Jewish state of Israel.

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