

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### **Bush's casual approach to the hostages**

*The President's take-charge impulse has changed into an effort to present a "business as usual" image at the White House.*

**C**onfusion characterized the first days' reaction by President Bush to the recent escalation of the Middle East hostage crisis.

Bush's initial reaction to news on July 21 of the probable execution of Lt. Col. William Higgins, and the prospect of more killings, was to drop everything and return from his Chicago speaking engagement, to Washington.

At first, it was seen that this swift move by the President to change plans to address the crisis head-on was a refreshing, take-charge kind of move.

But no sooner was he back on Air Force One en route to Washington, than the implications of his move began to dawn on Bush and his top advisers.

First of all, he was raising expectations that the U.S. would do something dramatic to prevent more hostages from being executed.

Second, he was playing into the hands of the terrorists by allowing them to set his agenda, even to the point of canceling an important speaking tour.

By the time Bush arrived at Andrews Air Force Base and was taken by helicopter from there to the South Lawn of the White House, his brief statement to reporters already revealed slight modification from his initial announcement.

After Bush and his key advisers finally did meet late in the day on July 31, Bush emerged at 9:30 p.m. with a short statement, which was interpreted as placing equal blame on Israel for its capture of the Shi'ite Sheikh Obeid, and on the terrorists responsible

for holding the U.S. hostages.

The statement made this clear by emphasizing the President's call for the release of hostages held by "all—all parties who hold hostages in the Middle East." The deliberate repetition of the term "all" was obviously intended to include Israel.

That night, Israeli spokesmen protested against Bush's implication that Israel should unilaterally release Obeid, whom Israel had reason to believe is a mastermind behind hostage-taking operations in Lebanon. On the contrary, they pointed out, information extracted from their captive could supply valuable intelligence on the whereabouts of the American hostages and on other matters pertaining to the terrorists and their sponsors.

At the daily White House briefing the next day, Aug. 1, spokesman Marlin Fitzwater refused to concede that the President's statement called for the Israelis to do that. But Fitzwater nevertheless managed to imply that the U.S. favored such an action, by repeating, like a broken record, the precise wording of the previous night's statement.

Fitzwater was rendered speechless, however, by reporters who asked him to distinguish between a "captive" and a "hostage." When asked if the U.S. equated Obeid, an alleged mastermind of terrorism, with the U.S. hostages, Fitzwater said he'd never been confronted with that "distinction in language" before, and that "frankly, I do not know how to respond."

By Aug. 2, the attitude of the administration had clearly changed.

Fitzwater was willing to say, for the first time, that President Bush was *not* asking for the Israelis to release Obeid.

By Aug. 3, the White House went even further, and was willing to acknowledge the possible truth of claims by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir that "hard evidence" was provided six months ago that Colonel Higgins was already long since dead. This took the onus off Israel's role in precipitating terrorist retaliation against American hostages.

But in its desire to create the image that the terrorists were not setting the presidential agenda, the White House had now become almost obsessed with insisting on "business as usual" while dealing with the crisis.

The President went ahead with the annual congressional barbecue on the South Lawn on Aug. 1, drawing almost 1,000 people for an evening of light entertainment and even lighter remarks by the President.

Then it was announced that the President would attend a baseball game in Baltimore on Aug. 4.

As of Aug. 3, no special National Security Council meeting was planned, and the announcements from the White House podium concerned the President's threatened vetoes of the savings and loan bailout bill and the District of Columbia appropriations bill.

Bush is betting that the American public, which is crying out for decisive action, will ultimately see the wisdom of his approach, no matter how similar it may appear to that of his two predecessors, neither of whom was able to effectively cope with the terrorist threat in the region.

If he bets wrong, it could be the first major setback in his well-cultivated public image since taking office.