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Prime Minister

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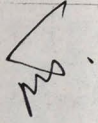
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BRITISH EMBASSY,

CAIRO.

You might care to read this, in view of President Mubarak's forthcoming visit.

CJP 26/2



VALEDICTORY FROM EGYPT

SUMMARY

1. Contrasts between the Egypt I first saw 40 years ago and the eras of Nasser and Sadat. Nasser created a welfare state at the cost of drab austerity, but the 1967 war left the country in ruins. Sadat restored national self-respect, material prosperity, and the innate exuberance of the Egyptians. (paragraphs 1 - 4)

2. The party is now over and economic problems are mounting, chiefly owing to inexorable population growth. But conservative instincts are strong, and most sectors of society have an interest in the status quo. No sign of a challenge to the regime, even from the Islamic fundamentalists. Barring an army coup, Egypt seems likely to remain in its present state of half-hearted revolution for the foreseeable future. (paragraphs 5 - 7)

3. Egyptians can be exempted from most of Sir James Craig's strictures on the Arabs. Their greatest weakness is the inability of those in authority to take decisions, perhaps because Egypt is the prisoner as well as the gift of the Nile. History has also bestowed a sense of security and identity, which allows Egyptians to consider themselves both part of the Arab nation and superior to the rest. They are determined to end the political isolation that followed Camp David, but will not repudiate the peace treaty. (paragraphs 8 - 11)

4. Sadat's journey to Jerusalem offered a great opportunity, but the Americans muffed it. Sadat paid the price with his life. Little sign that the lesson has been learned. For the West, the dangerous consequences of inaction remain the main argument for staying with the Palestine issue. The Europeans should nag the Americans in our own interests. (paragraphs 12 - 13)

5. Britain should be more actively involved in Egypt in every sphere foreign policy, defence, commerce and culture. Despite the historic

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advantages we enjoy, we are slipping behind the competition. A visit by the Prime Minister is embarrassingly overdue, and a prerequisite for improved relations. (paragraphs 14 - 17)

6. Tributes to wife and colleagues and gratitude to the Diplomatic Service. Concern lest public criticism of the Service reflects a national mood of self-absorption and even isolationism. Egypt still credits us with an internationalist role. (paragraphs 18 - 21)

BRITISH EMBASSY,
CAIRO.

28 January 1985

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe Kt QC MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs
LONDON SW1

Sir

VALEDICTORY FROM EGYPT

1. Forty years after first seeing Egypt, on wartime passage to India, and after eight years total service within the country, it is time for a last retrospective. That timespan would cover most of the recorded history of the first country I served in, Qatar. For Egypt it is but an evening gone, as the hymn says. Considering that a great deal of what Herodotus had to say about Egypt remains valid today, it is difficult for the contemporary observer to find novel themes, though over the past six years I have seen some interesting variations on old ones.

2. When British veterans of the Second World War make a sentimental return visit, as many still do, to the city that offered the juiciest fleshpots of any theatre of war, they are apt to be shocked by the transformation Cairo has undergone. Instead of quiet tree-lined avenues, Parisian arcades, palatial villas, polo at the Gezira Club and green fields stretching to the Pyramids, they see a teeming megalopolis of 14 million souls, its streets and pavements choked with strident traffic, new skyscrapers mushrooming unplanned, magnificent Islamic monuments crumbling unmaintained, dirt and pollution abounding, most services on the point of breakdown, and the Pyramids overtaken by urban sprawl. Twenty years ago there was a different and in my view more depressing contrast to be observed, between pre-revolutionary Cairo and the drab city I came to in the 1960s, when Nasser's policies had emptied the shops of consumer goods, the streets of cars, and the country of its substantial non-Egyptian communities - Greeks, Italians, Maltese, Armenians, Syro-Lebanese, Jews. These minorities may have had more than their share

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of the national wealth but they preserved, especially in Durrell's only slightly overwritten Alexandria, the European outlook and culture that Egyptian rulers had deliberately fostered since Napoleon first opened their eyes. Ordinary Egyptians would have regarded the loss as a reasonable and even necessary price to pay for the substantial social and economic benefits that Nasser brought them, had it not been for the consequences of his last disastrous adventure in foreign policy which left Egypt prostrate for six years after 1967.

3. Sadat's greatest service to his fellow Egyptians, through the crossing of the Canal in 1973 rather than the eventual recovery of Sinai, was to restore their self-respect. Later on, by concluding the peace treaty with Israel, he imbued the nation with his vision that the crushing burden of defence expenditure which Egypt had borne for thirty years could be switched to civil purposes and inaugurate a new era of prosperity. Predictably perhaps in any country, the military saw to it that no reduction in defence expenditure took place. Nevertheless the burden has been considerably lightened by the \$1 billion of military aid (now grant) plus \$1 billion of economic aid that represents America's annual reward for Sadat's signature at Camp David. The fruits of the canal crossing were even greater, in much increased oil production from the Red Sea and revenue from the newly opened Suez Canal. With all these gains Sadat was able, through his open door policy, to finance a higher standard of living for all throughout the 70s.

4. Although the policy also permitted a few, including Sadat's own family, to amass fortunes which they flaunted with a vulgarity repugnant to traditional Egyptian values, the masses were broadly content with acquiring their own status symbols, so that the average Egyptian village, without running water or sewerage, now boasts a panoply of refrigerators, air-conditioners, videos and (thanks to the government) electricity to run them. At the same time, by dismantling Nasser's notorious secret police, informer network, and detention camps, Sadat dispelled the shadow of political repression under which the nation had lived. Thus, when I arrived here in early 1979 the atmosphere was unrecognisable to one who had known Egypt in the 60s. Conditions in Cairo may be chaotic and sordid, but there

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a vibrancy about the place which invites comparison with New York rather than Calcutta.

5. Economic reality has cruelly reasserted itself during the 80s. On present trends domestic energy consumption, encouraged by subsidised prices ridiculously below international levels, will leave no oil for export by the end of this decade. Agricultural production, already abysmal, will dwindle steadily under the impact of subsidised imports, rising labour costs, the shift in popular taste from beans to meat, and the visible erosion of farm land by building, and by brick-making out of Nile mud that is no longer replenished annually. House building lags far behind the influx from the country to the cities, and landlords are able to charge extortionate rents and key-money for the most squalid accommodation. The bureaucracy, swollen by guaranteed jobs for graduates, must one day - like Cairo traffic - reach total paralysis, and end up stifling the private sector which offers the best hope of economic revival. And an inexorable population growth of nearly 3 per cent per annum will ensure an ever smaller share of the cake for the individual.

6. This situation is the despair of economists and the stuff of revolution. But what do we have? Last year the most nearly free elections since 1952 returned a substantial opposition party with the self-same name and leader as the 1952 revolution overthrew together with King Farouk. In their search for votes the New Wafd cynically co-opted a number of those Islamic fundamentalists whom their traditional supporters, the Christians and the middle class, consider the greatest threat to the established order. The opposition have not yet put together a programme but it will certainly not be revolutionary. The Left and the Nasserists were carefully denied representation in parliament, the latter forbidden even to form a party. In theory both groups are burning to reform society, but in practice they seem too content, living the typical intellectual's life divided between writing and lecturing in Egypt and attending conferences abroad, to have time for constructive political activity.

7. In social terms, the Egyptian upper class may have been destroyed but there is still a middle and a lower. The values of the former may be judged by the popularity of the British TV serial

/ "Upstairs



"Upstairs Downstairs" which was shown a year ago at peak viewing time seven days a week and repeated at least once, driving "Dallas" off the screen. For the millions of adult Egyptians for whom the nightly episode had absolute priority, it represented a nostalgic evocation of a society that still flourished in their life-time, though it had disappeared in England half a century before. Lower down the scale the peasant in the fields and the private in the army appear to accept the lot to which God and government have called them. The Cairo proletariat grumbles about economic hardship, but has no leaders to plead its cause. Furthermore almost every family has at least one member working abroad, a lucrative pattern which no one wants to disturb, though it is now threatened by recession in the host countries. And unlike the Gulf States Egypt has no Palestinian or Shia minority to subvert the regime from within. The real question-mark hangs over the Islamic fundamentalists, who are much written about but whom few outsiders meet. They are undoubtedly working underground - if that term can be applied to universities - to overturn the status quo, and their numbers will grow with the spread of education to levels of society previously untouched. But it seems likely to be some time before they are sufficiently well organised to mount a serious challenge. Finally, although I do not discount the possibility of an army coup, I suspect it is more likely to be mounted by a general, like the present Minister of Defence, who reckons he can run the show better than Mubarak, than by a revolutionary officer in the Qaddhafi mould. I now think that Egypt is likely to remain in its present state of half-hearted revolution, with a growing minority getting richer and a growing majority gradually poorer, for the foreseeable future (a term of infinite elasticity in this country). I have been forecasting doom annually for the past six years, and perhaps it is time to stop.

8. Last year my old friend James Craig wrote his valedictory essay on WWTA ("What's Wrong with the Arabs") in terms which must have made as comforting reading in clubland as Sir N Henderson's famous valedictory on WWTB (What's Wrong with the British"). I make bold to exempt the Egyptians from most of the strictures in the former work. While there is as much bombast, self-congratulation and self deception in the Egyptian media as in other Arab countries -

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indeed much more by volume since the Egyptian media eclipse the others in scale and experience - it is offset by a priceless national gift of humour and humanity. I have not met any other Arabs who are capable of laughing at their own foibles; in Egypt making irreverent jokes about authority is a national sport (the current theme is that Mubarak is too dull to make jokes about). They are also extraordinarily forgiving, both of individuals and of institutions. As far as Britain is concerned, Suez disappeared from the Egyptian political vocabulary years ago, long before it did in Britain - if it has. Despite the occasional assassination and crime passionnel the Egyptians are not a violent people and abhor bloodletting; the fratricidal carnage of Hama could not have happened here. But there is no lack of moral integrity. Among the Egyptian intellectuals, creative writers, journalists, film producers, and scholars, who for generations have dominated the Arab cultural scene, there were many who went into voluntary exile or refused to write rather than submit to the censorship and "guidance" of the Nasser and Sadat regimes.

9. Restrictions on free speech, which James Craig deplors as an endemic feature of Arab society, are milder under Mubarak than at any time in living memory, and numerous independent writers are taking full advantage of the thaw. The trouble in Egypt is that there is too much speech and not enough action. Government ministers know, and are constantly reminded by the IMF, what remedies are needed for the country's problems, and I do not think that their failure to act stems solely from fear of riots or losing their jobs. There seems to be a deeper inhibition afflicting almost everyone in authority which amounts to an unwillingness or even perhaps an inability to take decisions. The instinctive preference is for procrastination; no deadline is ever final; and the decision when taken is usually to set up a committee. As with the Arabs, this could be the fault of either the educational system (which is all theory and no practice) or of Islam. But I think a more important factor may be Egypt's 5000 years' dependence on the annual Nile flood and a complex irrigation system that left no room

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for individual initiative. Successive generations of Egyptians have always tended to turn their rulers into Pharaohs and to refer every decision to the top. We are seeing this happen to President Mubarak now, under the relentless sycophancy of the government media and the unchanging protocol that dictates that a circle of ministers and courtiers must accompany him everywhere he goes. Mubarak plainly lacks the decisiveness of a Nasser and is uncomfortable in the Pharaonic role. He would prefer to share responsibility, and I believe he sincerely wishes the democratic experiment which he launched with last year's elections to succeed. While one must share his hopes, my guess is that the system will defeat him, and that his experiment will end up in little more than a proliferation of debating societies designed to obscure the fact that there is going to be no devolution of power.

10. To that extent therefore one may say that Egyptian society exhibits some of the fecklessness which James Craig identifies as the principal and unlovable vice of the Arabs as a race. But the Pharaonic tradition has also given the Egyptians a sense of security and identity that allows them without shame to accept their incompetence, indecisiveness, lack of foresight, and public squalor as part of the natural order of things: the rest of the world can take it or leave it. My wife and I find that we can take it, for the sake of their compensating human qualities and of the extraordinary historical, cultural and physical panorama the country offers. We have made more genuine friendships here than in any other post.

11. One should perhaps pose the question, as many have, whether the Egyptians are Arabs at all, even within the broad terms of Craig's Law. The most telling evidence to the contrary is that when the average Egyptian speaks of Arabs he does not include himself, rather like the average Englishman speaking of Europeans. One has to put up with constant commiseration from those Egyptians who flock to London each summer on the fact that the place is being ruined by "the Arabs". At a deeper level, however, and unlike the British, I believe most Egyptians feel that by virtue of language and religion they are part of the wider Arab nation, though by virtue of / their



their ancient culture superior to the rest. When Nasser "rediscovered Egypt's Arabism" after 400 years of foreign domination, albeit for imperial purposes of his own, he evoked a spontaneous national response. Sadat's subsequent rallying cry of "Egypt for the Egyptians" was a natural reaction to the 1967 humiliation, and seemed equally popular at the time. Even now Mubarak and his principal colleagues continue to express privately the contempt that Sadat used to voice publicly for the Saudis, Palestinians and the Gulf Rulers as well as for the Libyans and Syrians whom he fears. In public policy, however, one only has to look at the innumerable short-lived unions that Egypt has contracted over the years with improbable Arab partners to appreciate the centripetal force of the idea of Arab nationhood. It is reasserting itself now, in Egypt's attempt to edge back into the main stream of Arab politics, on a common platform with the so-called moderates. The Israelis are deceiving themselves if they think, like Shamir, that they can force Egypt to choose between the peace with Israel and solidarity with other Arabs and the PLO. Neither the present regime nor any legitimate successor will repudiate the treaty, but they are anxious to put an end as soon as decently possible to Egypt's years of isolation. The Israelis for their part should surely welcome the process whereby Camp David has become generally accepted in the Arab world as a fait accompli, even if not yet as an example, and encourage the Egyptians in their efforts to build a moderate consensus.

12.

_____ it is probably fair to say that the best opportunity the West ever had _____ was offered by Sadat's journey to Jerusalem. And we - to be exact the Americans - muffed it. The Israelis were, understandably, intent on neutralising Egypt as a military threat. Sadat, as his speech to the Knesset made clear, was aiming from the outset for a comprehensive settlement. And in his post-Jerusalem euphoria he

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convinced himself, though few other Egyptians, that Begin would accept the essence of his proposals. Sadat's very naivete compounds President Carter's _____ in allowing him to be fobbed off with what was, for all his denials, a separate peace. It was a painful privilege to watch Sadat throughout his last three years as he struggled to supply fresh proof of Egypt's fidelity to Camp David and to keep the Americans up to the mark; as he followed one desperate gimmick with another (diverting Nile water to Israel, summit meetings with Begin, asylum for the Shah, facilities for the Iranian hostage fiasco and the US Rapid Deployment Force, expulsion of the Russian Ambassador), until the massive political purge of September 1981 which provoked his own assassination. I wrote at the time that this was perhaps Sadat's last great service to Egypt, since he had lost his way and the country needed a fresh start. His widow has since told me that she believes he had a premonition of his death and deliberately courted martyrdom.

13. One might have thought that Egypt's partners in Camp David would have heeded the lesson, but there is precious little sign of this. On the one hand President Reagan continues to harp on the need for "more Egypts, more Sadats", while on the other hand a Labour Prime Minister in Israel questions the "land for peace" principle of Resolution 242 on the grounds that it brought Israel no benefit in the case of Egypt. If both sides come to attach more importance to land than to peace the eventual result must surely be another round of war. Meanwhile, so long as the Arabs are militarily impotent, the militant Palestinians will continue to vent their frustration on their host countries in the diaspora. This argument is not especially compelling for the regional parties except those like King Hussein who see their regimes in imminent danger from continuing stalemate. Israel feels under no military threat, and the few Israelis like Abba Eban who point out the dangers of drift find themselves in the political wilderness. Many Arabs, including those Egyptians opposed to Camp David, see little point in negotiating from a position of military inferiority, and would shed few tears over the disappearance of some of the more reactionary Arab regimes. In the West, on the other hand, for as long as I can

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remember it has been the negative consequences of inaction, rather than abstract ideals of justice and peace, that constitute the decisive argument for persevering in the search for a negotiated settlement. The new and disturbing factor is that there is now a US Administration which appears either not to take seriously the risk of a gradual drift towards conflict; including perhaps the overthrow of a moderate Arab regime, or to be prepared to run it rather than stand up to the Jewish lobby. If we Europeans still hold the view that continued stalemate poses a grave threat to our own national interests then it behoves us to go on nagging the Americans to the extent of publicly disagreeing with them as necessary and expedient. There is nothing concrete they can do, any more than the Israelis, to penalise us for our importunity without damaging their own interests as well.

14. Although it is far from unusual for a British ambassador in a formerly dependent country to live surrounded by reminders of our imperial past, I doubt if there are many who still inhabit the premises from which it was ruled. In Egypt this merely reflects the fact that we ruled by might rather than right, while in theory the seat of authority remained with the Palace and the government. Lord Cromer's imposing residence was something of an embarrassment for the first 20 years of the revolution, when we were concerned to maintain a low profile while memories faded both of the British occupation and of the Suez affair. Since 1973 the pendulum has swung back to the point where the love-hate relationship has become an asset. Those Egyptians who recognise the old pile look on it affectionately as part of their history. And most of those one meets nowadays would like to see Britain much more actively involved here in every sphere - foreign policy, defence, commerce and culture. The motive is partly to offset the overwhelming predominance of the United States, but partly also I believe because there is an affinity between Egypt and Britain born of more than 100 years close contact that does not readily transplant across the Atlantic. We are better placed to take advantage of this sentiment than in many an Arab capital, for the ambassador of a major friendly country enjoys the easiest access to all levels of government from the President down.



15. Sadly I have to report that after several years steady progress, which peaked in Sadat's last summer, the British effort has tailed off and we have been overtaken not only by our old rivals the French but by other Europeans and in some respects even Canada. Bad luck has played a part. Our very success in getting the lion's share - production of Swingfire missiles and Lynx helicopters - of the tripartite Arab Organisation for Industrialisation, which could have been a model for further civil as well as military projects, meant that we suffered disproportionately when the Saudi and Gulf shareholders withdrew under the 1979 Baghdad boycott of Egypt. But our firms handled the resulting conflict of interest as between their Arab and Egyptian partners with such insensitivity that the scars have barely healed even now. I have given more recent examples in my Annual Review but there are some general points to be made, for the last time.

In trade the key to any contract here is soft finance, and so long as we refuse to play the game for reasons of economic principle we cannot hope for much. Yet we could still organise our effort better, by emulating the French method of identifying target countries and making them the object of a concerted campaign in which politicians, officials, companies and banks all play their part.

16. In the field of culture, the British Council, which owes its birth to the inspiration of a British High Commissioner in Cairo and opened its first overseas office here, is coining money for the Treasury by a first class teaching programme. Yet we are consciously jeopardising a century old Anglophile tradition in higher education by pricing the new generation of Egyptians out of British universities. In the arts we almost appear to be ashamed of our heritage. In my six years here the Council - as distinct from its admirable local initiatives - has not mounted one major artistic event, although they were common in the darker days and Shakespeare is a guaranteed sell-out. In the country which preserves the remains, literary as well as monumental, of a greater diversity of civilisations (Pharaonic, Greek, Roman and Islamic) than exists anywhere else in the world, Britain is almost the only Western nation of significance to have no institute of its own. In field archaeology a handful of dedicated British scholars keep alive the tradition of Flinders Petrie on a dwindling grant from the British Academy, but only by enduring conditions of

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extreme austerity and enlisting the help of unpaid amateurs. On the official side we teeter constantly on the brink of a decision to close the Consulate-General in Alexandria, the third largest city in Africa and a major commercial centre, to save some £50,000 a year. At least we are not burning the Library, like earlier conviction Christians, and if I am able to win a reprieve by extracting a few million from the Egyptians for our old consular premises sacked in 1967 this will no doubt qualify as a mission accomplished. But it will not efface the impression that we are becoming a nation of Philistines more preoccupied with pennies than with power, more interested in making quick profits from the oil sheikhdoms than in developing our assets and opportunities in a country of much greater size and influence.

17. One must not exaggerate. The Egyptians like most people are susceptible to flattery, and will respond to a renewed show of interest. Unfortunately, they have been spoiled in the years since Sadat became the darling of America by the attentions of world especially Western, statesmen at the highest levels. While the United Kingdom has managed to keep up a good working relationship through ministerial and official visits, the fact that no British Prime Minister has ever been to Egypt, despite repeated invitations and acceptances over the past ten years and numerous presidential visits to the UK, is beginning to assume the proportions of an affront to Egyptian national pride. I apologise for harping yet again on this familiar topic but I believe that the omission has now become an impediment to better relations such that they can only gradually deteriorate unless it is soon remedied.

18. I must end with the customary tribute to spouse and Service, empty gesture though it is to include a sentence or two of compliments in a despatch which will be read mainly by colleagues. In my case I have two wives to thank, both of whom have been a great support but the first of whom decided that diplomatic life was crippling to the spirit. The second had joined the Service before we met, and has no excuse. I am not therefore taking my leave in the same way as other valedictorians, and look forward to several further years service below stairs while my wife pursues her career.

/ Already



Already I owe to her a deeper insight into Egyptian society than I could otherwise have hoped to achieve. She has amply confirmed, from the personal friendships she built up with a range of Egyptian women from the wives of two Presidents to Marxists jailbirds, the view I formed during the testing time of Nasser that, broadly speaking, Egyptian women are much stronger characters than their menfolk. Leaving aside Queen Hatshepsut and Cleopatra, the earliest Egyptian feminists were active before Mrs Pankhurst, and achieved equality in politics and education well before the 1952 revolution. Regrettably the current female generation is suffering from, and indeed embracing, the Islamic revivalists' view of women's personal status, and these hard-won gains risk being eroded. This could have more than purely social consequences, for it is self-evident that the only solution for Egypt's greatest problem, over-population, lies in the continuing spread of enlightenment among its women.

19. To the Service I feel almost nothing but gratitude for 34 years of satisfying work and congenial companionship. For action and excitement there has been nothing to match the early, pre-oil, days in those one-man posts in the Gulf where the untrained equivalent of a District Commissioner found himself not only presiding judge, boundary demarcator, oil concession negotiator and manumitter of slaves, but also called upon to mobilise military resistance to the Saudi invader - all unencumbered by cypher communications bringing instructions or demanding reports. We made and unmade a few Rulers too in our time, and it was gratifying to note during a visit to the Gulf earlier this month that most of them appear to have at least as good prospects of permanence as the creations of Lawrence and Gertrude Bell. I am thankful also for the periodical relief afforded to me from the Arab world, especially 8 years total sojourn in the United States. Having had one's first experience of America in California and the West, in the days of Senator Knowland and the China Lobby, before moving to the East Coast, makes it easier to understand if not to sympathise with the mood in President Reagan's Washington.



20. A life-long friendship with many of the dedicated professionals in the State Department should also perhaps make it easier to react as philosophically as they when our own Service becomes the object of the same kind of public obloquy and misrepresentation as they have endured for decades. But it does not. Even after pleading collective guilt to occasional complacency, arrogance, spinelessness, misjudgement, high living and other human frailties I remain unable to fathom why journalists and politicians who have seen us at our work (and enjoyed our hospitality) should persist in both denigrating its value and attributing to the Office ulterior policies of its own; or indeed why the Treasury should choose to devote so many of its mandarin man-hours to the minutiae of our conditions of service. The motive of the superficial critic is perhaps to be found in that dogged British attachment, exemplified by Arthur Scargill, to the stereotype and the class outlook that provides an excuse for evading the more pressing and difficult challenges of changing times. If so the only course is to redouble our efforts of recent years to demonstrate that the stereotype is wrong. But if, as I sometimes fear, criticism of diplomacy reflects a growing national preoccupation with domestic problems and a feeling that the rest of the world - with certain exceptions - is not worth our attention, or at any rate not worth spending money on in the absence of a guaranteed return (a view expressed to me by one of our visiting ministers), then the task of a diplomat is indeed fruitless as well as thankless. There is no point in paying someone to obscure the fact that the emperor has no clothes.

21. At least there is honour outside one's country. The Egyptian Foreign Minister's last words to me today were in praise of the expertise, balanced judgement and consistency on Middle East affairs to be found not only among British diplomats but in British institutions as a whole, in contrast to the ever-changing scene in the United States. He hoped that these talents could be mobilised, and brought to bear across the Atlantic, in the cause of peace. This was more than just a pretty speech ad hominem, and I should like to see us doing more to justify the faith of people like him.



22. I am sending copies of this despatch to HM Representatives at Amman, Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Jedda, Khartoum, Tel Aviv, Washington and at the United Nations in New York.

I am Sir
Yours faithfully

Michael Weir

M S Weir