

Egypt bribed by U.S. \$\$

Some years back, a British friend and I were riding in a rickety Cairo taxi on the way to my umpteenth visit to the pyramids. The driver, without blinking an eye, ran smack into the back of a manure cart.

I was sitting in the front seat and went face first into the windshield, which shattered. My British friend was concussed and also bloodied.

We struggled out of the wreckage of the taxi and lay on the ground, awaiting what is laughingly called medical attention in Egypt.

As I lay there, covered with blood, broken glass and donkey poop, an Egyptian ambled up to me, stuck out his hand, and said, brightly, "Baksheesh, effendi, baksheesh!"

Baksheesh, as every Mideast traveller quickly learns, is the all-purpose Arabic word for tip, gift, bribe, or payoff. I don't recall this, but my British friend assures me I jumped up from my coma and yelled at the panhandler, "Here I am half dead and bleeding and you have the nerve to ask me for money! Imshy yallah! (Scram.)"

Egypt, today, is in much the same position as the beggar who asked me for baksheesh — but with much better luck. The U.S. announced Tuesday it was forgiving Egypt's US\$7.1 billion military debt as a thank-you for backing Washington in its fracas with that new mini-Evil Empire, Iraq.

Now \$7.1 billion is big, big baksheesh in anyone's books. It shows just how much Egypt is in hock to the U.S. and how money really does buy allies.

Not to be outforgiven, Israel immediately demanded that its nearly \$5 billion in debt to the U.S. also be wiped out. Congress will most likely comply. Total bill for the bankrupt U.S. treasury: \$12 billion.

Egypt didn't join the crusade against Darth Saddam for love of principle. It's working for the old Yankee dollar. All this began in the '70s when Egypt's leader, Anwar el-Sadat, literally sold his country to the U.S. In exchange for US\$2.5 billion in annual military and economic aid, Sadat let the U.S. turn Egypt into the military and political base for American domination of the Mideast.

The money was also baksheesh for agreeing to make peace with Israel. This, in turn, allowed

ERIC MARGOLIS



Israel a free hand to invade Lebanon 1982 in an abortive effort, with secret U.S. backing, to set up a puppet regime in Beirut.

Terribly overpopulated, with one of the world's highest birth rates, Egypt must import more than 60% of its food — most of which is paid for by U.S. economic aid. Without this aid, Egyptians would starve or revolt against the pro-western regime — which is run by the army. U.S. arms and military aid keep the officer-class of the army happy and well-fed, while the rest of Egypt lives from hand to mouth.

Given these hard political realities, it's no wonder that Egypt's decent but uninspired leader, Gen. Hosni Mubarak, was strong-armed by Washington into supporting U.S. intervention in Arabia. Add to this the traditional historical rivalry between Cairo and Baghdad for control of the Arab world.

"Egypt's okay and on our side" report western journalists in Cairo after talking to army officers, bureaucrats and English-speakers.

Yes, the ruling class and western-oriented elite is pro-American and compliant. But beneath them is the great mass of normally docile Egyptians who are watching with mounting anger as their country is being humiliatingly pushed around by its American overlords and thoroughly looted by corrupt officials and wheeler-dealers.

Just as significantly, Egypt has lost its historical role as leader of the Arabs. If you eliminate North Africa, Egypt contains 50% of the population of the Arab world. Cairo is the centre of Arab culture and intellectual life. Egyptian films and newspapers are viewed and read from Morocco to Iraq.

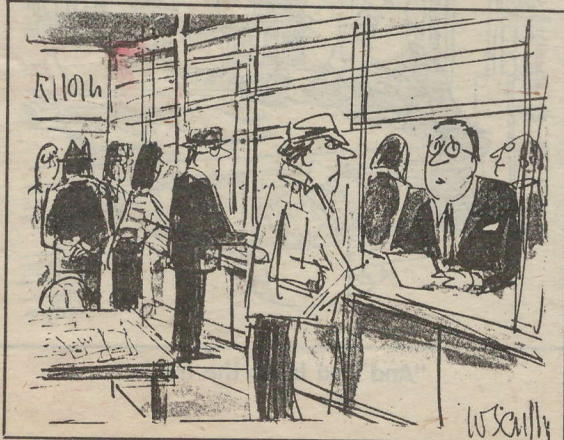
In spite of such inherent power, Egypt has become a political eunuch. Its military rulers have been too obviously catspaws of Washington. As a result, they have lost legitimacy and respect.

Beneath the placid surface of easy-going Egypt, a powerful Islamic earthquake is building. You sense it in small villages up the Nile or in the verminous, garbage-strewn back alleyways of Cairo. Furious, passionate, almost frantic men and women who are steeped in shame at what their once-proud nation has become.

This is precisely the same explosive pressure that built up in Iran before that other favorite satrap of the U.S., the Shah of Shahs, was overthrown by an obscure old man named Ruhollah Khomeini.

Americans, with their swaggering righteousness, dismal ignorance of foreign places and absolute conviction that God is a California Republican are making Egypt sing for its supper for all the world to see. They don't yet see the mobs building up in the souks of Cairo, Asyout and Alexandria, carrying pictures of Gammal Abdel Nasser, Imam Khomeini and Saddam Hussein.

Punch



"I'm afraid I must have proof of the gun."