

Next Mideast hot spot

Apart from the naked, sun-seeking Swedes cavorting on Tunisia's excellent beaches, this little North African country of 7 million is a pretty dull place. Many Tunisians, an easy-going, patient people, like it that way. In North Africa there is an old saying: Tunisians are women; Algerians are men; and Moroccans, lions.

Change, however, is on the way. The long simmering Tunisian *couscous* pot may soon boil over, bringing yet another crisis to the already overheated Mediterranean. The nation's president for life, 83-year old Habib (the Beloved One) Bourguiba, is ailing. Tunisians are now beginning to suspect that Africa's longest-ruling head of state may not, as once rumored, actually live forever.

To no surprise, many normally placid Tunisians are fed up with being ruled by the same man for 30 years and want political change. Half of the population was not even born in the heroic days of 1956 when a young revolutionary Bourguiba helped win Tunisia's independence from France. Today, he is seen by many as a cantankerous and capricious octogenarian determined to hold on to power at any cost.

Just last week Bourguiba fired his heir-designate, Prime Minister Mohammed Mzali and replaced him by the lacklustre minister of finance, a certain Rachid Sfar. Nothing novel in this: Bourguiba is noted for abruptly firing any subordinates suspected of coveting the leader's position.

This most recent palace coup came after two years of mounting riots by Tunisians angry over economic problems and Bourguiba's close alliance with the USA. In fact, Bourguiba has, in recent years, turned Tunisia into pretty much of an American client state. Washington provides Tunis with money and military backing. In exchange,

Punch



"I must admit, Cynthia, I'm not fit to breathe the same air as you--polluted as it is."

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



Tunisia generally follows the U.S. Mideast line, provides the CIA with useful intelligence-gathering facilities and keeps on exceedingly bad terms with neighboring Libya.

Wicked Col. Moammar Khadafy, Washington's "Great Satan," blasts Bourguiba as a toady of the U.S. and has mounted a number of bungled attempts to unseat him. Bourguiba has reciprocated by hosting not infrequent attempts by the CIA and Libyan exiles against Khadafy's life.

To make matters worse, Khadafy has loudly proclaimed his ambition that "brotherly" Tunisia and Libya will merge. This prospect does not please older Tunisians who regard Libyans as back country primitives. But among the large numbers of unemployed Tunisian youth, Khadafy's pan-Arabism has strong appeal.

Such nationalist sentiment is being channeled into rising anti-Americanism. Washington is rightly viewed by many Tunisians as propping up the Bourguiba dictatorship. The death-knell of U.S. influence over Tunisia may have been marked by last fall's Israeli bombing of PLO headquarters in Tunis. Many Tunisians were killed; all were outraged when President Ronald Reagan and his foot-and-mouth disease expert, Secretary of State George Shultz, lauded the Israeli attack until enlightened by aides that Tunisia was a close American ally. "Oops, sorry," said Reagan and Shultz, but the damage had been done.

Which brings us to the problem of what will happen when Bourguiba finally joins his ancestors. The U.S. will try to prop up the remnants of the old regime in the face of a popular, revolutionary uprising by nationalist forces and unions. Chances are good that a strongly anti-American and — gasp — pro-Libyan regime may emerge.

The prospect of "Mad Dog Moammar" as guest of honor in Tunis could provoke an already trigger-happy U.S. to military intervention in Tunisia — under the handy pretext of saving it from a "Libyan invasion." Post-Bourguiba chaos might indeed cause intervention by Libyan or Algerian troops. A melee in Tunis might also draw in the Soviets who may, by then, have gotten tired of watching the Americans kick around their local Arab pals.

Washington could just let Tunisia alone but that is not the way of "bomb 'em until they behave" Shultz, keeper of the Big Stick. So expect some trouble in Tunisia, a thoroughly unnecessary crisis in an unimportant place. Well, maybe not quite that unimportant. After all, the U.S. must prevent those nude Swedish cuties from falling into the swarthy, twitchy hands of Moammar the Menace.