

ISRAEL AND THE MEDIA

Last week, John Chancellor of the NBC network met with some Jewish community relations officials, who wanted to discuss a recent editorial of his which had offended Jews across the nation.

In that editorial, Chancellor had said that Israel would get all the military and economic aid it needed from the US., despite the fact that Israel had rejected many of the tactical proposals made by the U.S. A reason, he said, was the large contributions made by Jews to American politicians, especially during an election year.

Chancellor told the Jewish delegation last week that he had been pondering the heavy negative reactions to that editorial with some puzzlement, since he is personally a strong supporter of Israel and thought he was just reporting the facts.

He said the puzzle had finally fallen into place for him. His short editorial did not reflect his positive feeling about Israel, which he took for granted (did not consider newsworthy). Lacking the positive elements, the undue emphasis on Jewish political clout could feed unhealthy tendencies on the American scene. He regretted not having thought of that possibility.

Well, the fault may partly be that of the Jewish community. We have been so busy with The Jewish Business -- making and puffing organizations -- that we have ourselves furthered the impression that American support for Israel is mainly based on our sheer political clout and fundraising. That's nonsense.

American support for Israel is mainly based on the objective conditions (vis-a-vis Syria, for example) which make it clear that support of Israel is important for the American national interest. Our political activity is extremely important -- but mainly because it gives us access to policy-makers, so that we can more effectively press the tactical logic flowing from those objective conditions. But if these conditions did not exist, our political clout would not prevail by itself.

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But it is disconcerting that John Chancellor did not make the connections himself, before he wrote the editorial. The episode is reminiscent of an earlier delegation visit to an editor of the San Francisco Chronicle about an anti-Israel cartoon, bordering on the anti-semitic. This Chronicle editor had seen the cartoon before it was published, and had not thought it was objectionable. Now, pondering it, he agreed that it was objectionable. He said he was rather startled that he had not caught the implications when he first saw the cartoon, because his job during World War II had been to counter Nazi and anti-semitic propaganda.

Are we to conclude that these media people are just all too human? Do they make such mistakes simply because, not being Jews, they just don't make the sinister connections? At best, there is something more involved. Most of those who make such errors are not basically anti-Israel or anti-semitic. But they are consumed with the vocational need to catch attention. They consider blandness to be the major crime. Saying something nice about Israel, which the government and most Americans support, will not draw attention to them.

The show-business approach to the news, rather than enmity to Israel, is the main problem with the media. There must be the constant, drudging business of pointing out to them, case by case, some of the unfortunate fallout from viewing excitement rather than truth as the major goal of journalism.