

Jewish Power?

At a time when American Jews are wondering just how much influence they *do* have to affect events, non-Jewish groups seem to be talking more and more about "Jewish power."

A "Black-Jewish Consultation" was just held at Fisk University in Tennessee. Fisk University and the American Jewish Committee brought together a small group of Black and Jewish scholars and leaders from around the country to talk about current relationships between the two groups. That sort of meeting has not been held for several years, and some valuable communication took place.

But some of us there were struck by one theme which emerged from the Black speakers. "We are powerless, and you, the Jews are powerful," they kept saying in one form or another.



Raab

At about the same time, in a different place, Father Theodore Hesburgh, nationally known as President of the University of Notre Dame and Chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, was making another speech to this effect: "The Jews are able to achieve their agenda -- with respect to Israel and Soviet Jewry, for example -- but we Catholics have been totally unable to achieve our agenda -- with respect to aid for parochial schools and the abortion issue, for example. Why are we American Catholics so powerless?"

It is an old theme, which can be uttered with several different tones. Father Hesburgh was presumably approving of "Jewish power" and criticizing his own Catholic group for not organizing themselves more effectively toward that end. But such a benign tone can all too easily turn into some annoyance, and the annoyance can turn into downright hostility.

We know how the benign approach to "Jewish power" can be transmuted into the most malign attack on the Jews. In the University of California's survey a few years ago, the one belief held by the most committed and overt anti-Semites was: "The Jews have too much power." This was, of course, the heart of the Hitlerian premise.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this growing chorus of "Jewish Power" is that it is largely an illusion. At Fisk it became clear that some of the speakers were confusing prosperity and power. In terms of average income, the Jews are one of the most affluent religious or ethnic groups in the country. But that average income for the Jews reflects a high level of success in the professions and secondary businesses. While a certain condition of day-to-day privilege results from this kind of occupational prosperity, it does not translate into financial power. That kind of financial power resides in the huge corporations, the banks, and the major industries -- in which Jews are not notably present. It is these institutions which *control* more money and financial policy than their dividends or executive salaries would indicate.

Political power -- the power to influence American public policy -- is partly a function of such financial power; it is also partly a function of population pressure applied in the democratic process. The potential of Jews to influence elections, for example, has been diminishing as pools of Jewish population have been scattering out of the central cities. Even the theoretical "Jewish vote," if it were concentrated, would make absolutely no difference in the vast majority of Congressional districts.

If American Jews have more influence on public affairs than their numbers or financial condition would suggest, it is because on certain issues, they are unusually energetic, involved, articulate, persuasive and unified. That's the sum and substance of "Jewish power," and it is limited enough. The point is that there is nothing sinister or controlling about that kind of activity. And the further point is that this activity, so visible, projects an illusion of "power" which does not really exist -- an illusion which some Jews themselves share.