

THE DESCENT OF A COALITION*

The "Black-Jewish Coalition" - From one viewpoint

There is this legend: a Grand Coalition among disadvantaged and mutually sympathetic groups in America which started in the early 1930s, helped bring the country to new plateaus of social progress, and came to an untimely end in the late 1960s. The Blacks and the Jews were not the whole of that legendary coalition by any means, but they were at its symbolic center. Now, the legend continues, the Blacks and Jews are at loggerheads, and symbolize the break-up of that coalition.

This legend, as usual, contains some truths and some distortions. Scrutiny of the legend amounts to scrutiny of differences between the 1930s and the 1970s -- and the difference of the 1950s from both. It also touches on the nature and utility of political coalitions in general.

There are three levels of political friendship among disparate groups, which might be distinguished as "union," "coalition" and "detente." When such groups form a union, they have come to such sweeping and long-range agreements that they usually solemnize their relationships within a permanent structure. The thirteen American colonies formed such a union. So did the AFL and the CIO. At the other end of the spectrum is detente, the lowest level of friendship, scarcely friendship at all. The word "detente" means "holding back." When two entities acknowledge that they are and will continue to be on certain antagonistic courses, they can agree to refrain from acts of extreme hostility: war, arms build-up, trade boycott. The United States and the Soviet Union have, of course, been struggling with forms of detente.

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Somewhere in the middle of that spectrum is coalition, as that word is commonly used. Groups in coalition are positive allies, unlike those in a state of detente; the focus is on concurrence, not on antagonism. But the alliance tends to be temporary, based on specific and short-range goals, and minimally formalized.

However, it should be noted that while coalitions are not highly formalized relationships, these relationships are normally developed among formal groups. It is hard to speak of a coalition between populations; coalitions exist between organized groups within those populations. Those coalitions are significant insofar as the formal organizations involved are seen as having, not the unanimous, but the prevalent support of the active political elements in their population.

Coalitions can be based, most strongly, on common interests, even where there are different motivational origins; or, less strongly, on quid-pro-quo arrangements, where there is general compatibility. Within a stabilized union of disparate groups, there are often shifting coalitions -- and, indeed, states of detente.

But all states of political friendship start with this premise: political relationships among disparate groups are based on self-interest. Detente, coalition or more stable union are based on the self-interest of the groups involved. That is not a cynical statement, nor even just a realistic statement; it is a statement of ideals. The principle of self-interest is central to a democratic society; it distinguishes a democratic society from an undemocratic society. The principle of self-interest distinguishes a society in which people decide what is best for them; rather than having other people decide what is best for them; or deciding what is best for other people. Basic instruments of democracy, from the electoral process to collective bargaining laws exist towards the end of letting people decide what is in their own best interests. That is distinct from the principle of letting ideologues or experts -- high-minded or minded -- decide what is in everybody's best interest. The latter is the principle

of "the general will of the people," as beneficently proclaimed by visionary prophets such as Rousseau, Lenin and Hitler. Rousseau put it classically: "Any one who refuses obedience to the General Will is forced to it by the whole body. That merely means that he is being compelled to be free."

Conflicting self-interests are eminently legitimate in a democratic society. Of course, if there is to be society at all, that means "enlightened" self-interest: the acceptance of negotiation and accommodation, and of values which circumscribe self-interest. But for a healthy society -- and for a healthy coalition -- self-interest is the beginning and central focus.

For a coalition to exist certain areas of group self-interest must coincide importantly. That was the case in the early 1930s, for the Blacks and for the Jews. In 1933, both were economically disadvantaged groups. The Jewish experience was still dominantly an immigrant experience. In 1905, Peter Wiernick, editorial writer of the Jewish Morning Journal of New York City, wrote: "The truth is that 85 or 90 per cent of the Russian Jews are so much below everything we know here that we would have to go to the Southern Negro for a familiar example..." The Jews were an economic under-class not only because of their background, but because of prevailing discriminatory bars. Job ads read "Gentiles Only" just to make sure. It wasn't even necessary for the ads to say "Whites Only."

The common cause was primarily economic: to break down the barriers of "economic royalism," as Franklin D. Roosevelt called it; to get a piece of the apple pie; to assure a measure of economic security. This was the basis of the FDR coalition. The labor, Black and Jewish communities were highly visible elements of that coalition.

The membership of organized labor grew from less than three million to over 8 million between 1933 and 1940, with the help of that political coalition, the laws and climate that it promulgated. Many of the skilled crafts unions rigorously excluded Blacks, but

some of the large new industrial unions, such as the steel workers and the auto workers provided a first mass entry for Blacks into the labor movement. The public works projects created by the new political coalition also provided a new entry for Blacks into organized labor. Jews had been part of the industrial labor movement through specialized unions which they had helped to create, such as in the needle trades. Many ethnic groups were of course part of the growing labor movement. But the Blacks had some forms of organization as Blacks; the Jews, as Jews. So, labor, Blacks and Jews were each self-interest groups which had a strong organizational identity of their own. They were a vanguard coalition on economic progress, within the larger coalition, which was the Democratic Party.

The post World War II 1950s scene was different. In a sense, the labor unions had "made it." In 1933, only about 5 per cent of the total labor force had been labor union members. By the early 1950s, about 25 per cent of the total labor force was in the organized labor movement. In fact, the percentage of membership levelled out, and even dropped, from that point on. But it dropped partly out of success. Many of labor's goals had been institutionalized, and even taken over by law and government. And the prevailing wage level had risen. The average constant-dollar, earning-power wage had risen by over 50 per cent between 1939 and 1954. Much of the labor force had moved over into a middle class economic style.

In that sense, the Jewish population had also made it economically in that fifteen year period. The post-immigrant Jewish population had accomplished this mainly in the self-employed professions, and in certain marginal industries, but the bars of economic discrimination had also begun to drop considerably for the Jews. By the 1950s, the average personal income of the Jewish population compared favorably with all but the most WASPish groups in America. It was partly a misleading statistic, because the Jews

all did not have access to the centers of financial power in the country, being excluded

from the executive circles of the burgeoning industrial and financial corporations. But in terms of personal income, the Jews as a group were not economically deprived, even though there were still pools of residual poverty.

There had been no such break-through for the Blacks, however. There had been some statistical progress resulting from the earlier political efforts. In 1939, the median wage of the Black worker was little more than a third that of the white worker; in the middle of the 1950s, it was little more than half. But such statistics also served to emphasize the enormous gap that still existed; that kind of statistical progress only raised expectations, and frustrations. The Black population was still in a severe state of economic depression -- and it was clear that discriminatory bars were still a major impediment to Black economic progress.

This set the stage for the civil rights revolution, which started significantly as a legislative revolution. From the close of World War II to 1964, about 40 industrial states passed laws forbidding discrimination in private and public employment, and in other areas. That movement culminated in 1964 with the passage of the federal civil rights act. During this period of activity, the pattern of discriminatory bars against Blacks dropped more significantly than ever before: while 7 per cent more of the white labor force was moving into middle class occupations, 17 per cent more of the Black labor force was moving into middle class occupations.

This movement was associated with the civil rights legislative drive --and there was frequent reference to the "coalition" which spearheaded it, with the labor, Black and Jewish communities prominently in evidence. But there were some significant differences.

The priority objective of the First Coalition had been economic security and a place in the economic mainstream of America. The unifying political principles had centered around social security and fair labor practices. These were the principles around which the self-interest of these several groups had coalesced. Now, in the 1950s, the ob-

jective was specifically equal opportunity for those who had been the victims of deliberate group discrimination. Some Latino and some Asian groups began to join this coalition as it gained momentum, but the initial and overwhelming image was equal opportunity for the American Black community.

Labor did not have the same clear self-interest in the objectives of the Second Coalition as it had in the First. Indeed, there were still large craft unions at the beginning of the 1950s which virtually excluded Blacks. But labor leadership had a strong sense of its political stake in maintaining the coalition within the Democratic Party.

Organized Labor was important for the civil rights legislative effort; the support of the state federations of labor were often critical for the passage of such legislation. But to some degree this coalition, for labor, was now a quid-pro-quo coalition rather than a common interest coalition, and labor had less of a role in its policy-making aspects.

Both the Black and the Jewish elements of this coalition were stronger, in themselves, than they had been during the First Coalition. Even in the Southern states the number of Black citizens registering to vote rose from about 300 thousand in 1938 to 600 thousand in 1948, and a million by 1954. The Black population was obviously becoming an important political factor. The Jews, for their part, had become disproportionately active in politics during the 1930s and 1940s, and organized Jewish groups had become skilled in the political process. In state after state, as the civil rights legislative movement gained momentum, Jewish groups were prominent along with Black groups in the leadership of that movement. Indeed, the Jewish public affairs apparatus around the country, which had grown considerably during the Hitler years, expended most of its energy and resources on the civil rights agenda during the 1950s and early 1960s.

The intensity of the Jewish effort during this period indicated that this was for them a common cause coalition, and not just a quid-pro-quo coalition. But what was the common cause? A survey by the California State Employment Service around 1950 found

that about 25 per cent of all California employers seeking white collar workers indicated that they would not hire Jews no matter how well qualified. But the Jews were heavily in the professions and self-employed by this time; there were plenty of non-discriminatory opportunities open to them, and these were clearly on the increase. In short, as a group, Jews were not suffering economically because of discrimination. What then was the compelling self-interest of the organized Jewish community in the civil rights battle? The answer to this question is important, among other reasons, in order to throw some light on the current situation.

Voting analysts have constantly pointed out, sometimes to their own astonishment, that Jews seem to be the only ethnic group in the country which does not vote its pocketbook. For example: among those of Irish descent or Italian descent or whatever, the more affluent middle class tends to vote Republican, the less affluent tend to vote Democratic in national elections. Jewish voting just does not follow this pattern. In the last Nixon presidential campaign, for example, the Jewish Republican vote was somewhat higher than it had been in most previous presidential elections; but two thirds of the Jews still voted for McGovern, and were the only white ethnic group in the country to vote a Democratic majority. Indeed the Black vote that year was instructive. In the inner rings of the cities, the Black vote for the Democrat was almost unanimous; in the outer rings of the cities, the Black vote for the Democrat was down to about 80 per cent. But in the suburbs, where 15 per cent of the Black population now lived, often in relatively affluent ghettos, the Black vote for the Democratic candidate was a couple of percentage points below that of the Jewish Democratic vote. Indeed, according to the precinct analyses, the defection from the Democratic Party, such as it was, took place more among lower-income Jews than among higher-income Jews.

On social issues, the same pattern is invariable. For example, the Public Opinion Research office at Princeton did a survey of various religious groups and their support of the political principle of guaranteed economic security. In each case, except for

the Jews, the percentage in favor of guaranteed economic security corresponded almost exactly with the percentage of urban manual workers in that group. Thus, 51 per cent of the Baptists were manual workers, and 51 per cent of the Baptists supported guaranteed security; 55 per cent of the Catholics were manual workers and 58 per cent supported guaranteed security; 28 per cent of the Congregationalists were manual workers and 26 per cent supported guaranteed security, and so forth. But while 27 per cent of the Jews were manual workers, 56 per cent of them supported guaranteed security.

There is a similar kind of pattern, of somewhat less significance, with respect to civil rights issues. For example, the Jews were the only white ethnic or religious group to vote in favor of civilian review boards in New York; the only white ethnic or religious group to vote against the referendum in California which tried to overturn that state's fair housing laws. Incidentally, the Jews were the only white ethnic group to vote against that famous Proposition 13 "tax revolt" in California this year, contrary to what seemed to be their pocketbook interest.

This pattern of Jews voting against their pocketbook interests has sometimes led to an over-simplified self-congratulatory tone within the Jewish community. The theory has been proposed that the Jewish religious commitment to prophetic social justice is so strong that their altruistic convictions over-ride their self-interest. There is, however, a much more compelling theory: the Jews have a group self-interest in the political arena, which is at least as strong as their economic well-being -- that is, a self-interest in a kind of political society which will protect the Jews from political oppression.

Racial, ethnic and religious groups tend to act politically and consciously as economic self-interest groups only when they are predominantly deprived. If they become very mixed in their economic status, or if they become predominantly affluent, their members act on their economic self-interest through other associations, not racial, ethnic

or religious associations -- and the group itself will no longer act effectively as a group on economic issues. It is for that reason that some ethnic and religious groups which had their political group identity mainly in matters of economic self-interest, have lost their political identity as groups.

The Jews did have a group economic self-interest identity in the 1930s which they do not have today. But the Jews have always had a special political self-interest as a group, which existed separately and more durably. This fact does not require elaboration, but perhaps deserves recapitulation. At least since their dispersal, over 19 centuries ago, Jews have lived in a wide variety of political societies as a minority. In all of those societies, they have insisted on maintaining their Jewish beliefs and their Jewish communal identities. In almost all of these cases -- for a variety of religious, nationalistic and political reasons -- these societies have not tolerated these differences for very long and have moved to oppress them in one form or another. The toleration and protection of such differences of belief is, of course, one way to define political freedom in general. The Jewish historical experience has taught them that their prime self-interest as a group lies in those societies whose institutions are committed to political freedom -- that is, to the freedom of both individual and group differences. To put it another way: Jews have learned that their security depends less on whether people like or dislike Jews, than on whether Jews live in a kind of society where their right to individual and group differences are protected, like them or not.

None of this emphasis on self-interest is meant to disparage the effect of religious values and commitments. The long-range effect of the Jewish -- and Christian -- commitment to social justice, on the nature of political societies cannot be dismissed, and is the subject for another discussion. The counter-vailing effect of religious commitments on any given individual cannot be dismissed, and is the subject for another discussion. However, the behavior of the organized Jewish community -- or any other organized community -- and its participation in the coalitions of the 1930s and of the 1950s, and its stance in the 1970s cannot be realistically understood without strong

reference to the nature of its group self-interest.

The Jewish community was not involved so heavily in the Second Coalition, the civil rights coalition, because of its own economic self-interest, or because of altruistic desires to gain social justice for the Blacks. The Jewish community was centrally involved because of its political self-interest; its instinct that the civil rights revolution would solidify the kind of society in which Jews would be protected as a minority. The Jewish community was in the civil rights coalition because its self-interest coincided with the self-interest of the Black community, even if the two were not identical in origin.

In the last dozen years, this particular coalition has virtually ceased to operate because that same self-interest of the Jews did not seem to coincide with the new strategies of the post civil rights movement. There are subsidiary reasons, but that is the central reason.

In the middle 1960s the organized Jewish community began to call for affirmative action. Along with the rest of the civil rights movement, it recognized that the civil rights revolution would never catch up with historic oppression of Blacks unless extraordinary efforts were made. Society now had to become beneficently race-conscious. Employment tests and standards had to be revised to become job-relevant. Active searches had to be made for qualified Black workers. Special training programs had to be set up for qualifiable Black workers. And employers had to be pushed towards fulfilling equal opportunity laws, so that they wouldn't drag, or be dragged by their middle-level personnel people. The idea of goals and timetables was introduced to keep the heat on employers. The organized Jewish community supported all these developments.

Then gradually these affirmative action proposals evolved into normative quota proposals.

It wasn't the absolute idea of employment quotas which frightened the Jewish leaders. There were not the same negative reactions to specific quotas imposed as the only remedies for recalcitrant employers, those who resisted affirmative action. As far back

as the 1930s, Harold Ickes had imposed a quota in construction jobs for public works because the craft unions had refused to open their ranks effectively. In the 1960s and 1970s, courts imposed temporary quotas on private and public employers who had refused to implement an affirmative action program. Those were specific remedies, and were generally not found disturbing.

What was disturbing was the developing image of an America in which proportional group representation would be the prevailing pattern, not just in jobs, but in politics, and in other spheres of American life. This image was antithetical to the Jewish self-interest in a kind of society characterized by individual freedom as well as by pluralism. The Jews had lived in societies in which only groups were assigned rights and individuals had their rights and identity only through their membership in a group. They had learned that that was not the kind of society in which political freedom could flourish, or in which they could live in freedom.

In most cases, the group-proportion proposals which Jewish organizations began to oppose in the late 1960s and the 1970s, were not in situations which offered any direct economic threat to Jews. There were a couple of noteworthy exceptions. One developed in some urban school systems, epitomized by the ^{Ocean Hill, Brownsville} Bedford-Stuyvesant embroglio in the late 1960s. One of the significant ways in which members of New York's economically deprived Jewish community was able to avoid discriminatory bars and enter the economic mainstream in the 1930s was by breaking into the school system as teachers. In the 1960s group-proportion formula to displace the just-emerged group with a newly emerging group seemed a classic form of economic confrontation.

Professional school admissions might also be seen as a form of this classic economic confrontation between emerging and just-emerged groups -- in the sense that the Jews had made their escape from economic oppression primarily through the professional route. However, the organized Jewish community was more ambiguous on this issue, since

It seemed to be a cross between a group-proportion approach, and a legitimate affirmative action relating to remedial education. Two major national Jewish organizations supported the De Funis case, two other major national Jewish organizations opposed it. There was some division, too, on the case of Bakke, who is not Jewish. Generally speaking, the chief objections in the Jewish community were not that race was taken into consideration as a factor -- but that the use of a group-proportion numerical formula was institutionalized.

These points of direct economic confrontation are real. However, they are the exceptions in the quota controversy. They are not as prevalent as was the economic confrontation between Jews and Blacks, when the latter were moving into neighborhoods right behind Jews, who then so often became the landlords and small merchants. That confrontation scene has been disappearing. And direct confrontation on the employment scene is actually taking place more often between Blacks and members of other emerging racial and ethnic groups, than between Blacks and Jews.

American history is a kaleidoscopic series of immigrant groups emerging, as other immigrant groups enter the scene right behind them -- with resultant intergroup competition and confrontation. Some of the largest political-extremist movements in the country developed around such situations. The extremist American Protective Association developed significant mass support in the latter part of the nineteenth century -- as did the Second Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century -- among earlier immigrant workingmen who faced economic competition and displacement by waves of Irish, then Southern European and Eastern European immigration. In each case, the situation was saved, and the extremist movements blunted by the recovery and growth of the American economy, which relieved the competition between the ethnic groups involved.

"Political extremism," parenthetically, is the description of a politics which is antithetical to individual and group freedom, to the kind of society which is important to Jewish self-interest. A situation in which unrelieved economic conflict exists between emerging and just-emerged groups, and where the economy is generally static, is one where the development of political extremism is most likely. Such extremist movements have historically been sponsored by economically powerful groups, in whose interest it was to spawn conflict between their natural political antagonists. The avoidance of this kind of conflict, by the expansion of the economy and of economic opportunity, should therefore be in the natural self-interest of the Jews, to whom political extremism is the mortal enemy, as well as to any groups suffering directly from this economic competition in a tight marketplace.

Nevertheless, in the Black-Jewish context -- although there have been exceptions as noted above -- it would be a serious miscalculation not to see the "quota controversy," as primarily a mis-match between the economic self-interest of the Black community, and the political self-interest of the Jewish community, as the latter perceives the imperatives of political freedom.

The Black community, of course, perceives the quota question quite differently. They are not pursuing a political ideology, a group-proportion ideology at all through their support of the quota; primarily they are extending their pursuit of economic justice. The Black experience with the lack of political freedom is as intense as, if less varied than, that of the Jews. But the Black relationship to American freedom has been substantially different than that of the Jews. The Jews came to this country, having been in a state of oppression elsewhere. The Blacks were brought to this country for oppression by this society. The Jews have a sense of the potential of American political freedom, which they are interested in strengthening and maintaining. There is less natural reason for Black Americans to have a sense of that potential. And there

is little reason for American Blacks to believe that economic progress will be maintained without the most severe and mandatory measures.

More than that, it has always been axiomatic that for the economically deprived, economic aspirations will take priority over the imperatives of political freedom. In brief, economic justice is still the first priority self-interest consideration of the Black community. ~~Economic justice is not today a prime self-interest consideration of the Jewish community.~~ Political freedom, rooted in individual freedom, is the first priority self-interest consideration of the Jewish community. These two different priority self-interests were operative in the Second Coalition; but in that civil rights context they were totally congruent with each other. Today, in a group proportion context, these same self-interests are not seen as congruent with each other. There is probably no way in real life to fully reconcile these priority self-interests.

Another series of elements entered in the late 1960s to complicate the relationship between Black and Jewish communities. Involved were two separate factors which often became intertwined: Israel and ideological Third World politics.

Most of the American Jewish community had taken Israel for granted as a safe harbor for Jews from Hitler's Europe -- until the 1967 war in the Middle East. Overnight it suddenly became dramatically apparent to American Jews that Israel was in constant and mortal danger. Most American Jews had not been formal adherents of any particular Zionist group or theory although there was, of course, a prevailing sense of Judaism's roots in that biblical land. But the logic which bound most Jews together in support of Israel was an extension of the political self-interest described above:

In the latter part of the 19th century it became evident to large numbers of Western Jews that nationalist Europe was no more hospitable to Jews than religious Europe had

- a. European liberalism following the French Revolution was not developing the kind

of society which could tolerate both individual and group differences. Herzl, founder of the political Zionist movement, was finally brought to this conclusion as he covered the Dreyfuss trial as a journalist. For Eastern European Jews, the inhospitability of Europe was an even more palpable fact. Hitlerism substantiated the prophecy. And while Hitlerism was establishing itself as a fact, the nations of the free world were demonstrating that they were not going to provide living space for the European Jews. In short, there was no place to go but Israel, as the United Nations itself agreed. In addition, 750,000 Middle Eastern Jews fled to Israel as refugees from Arab lands. It became clear that for the foreseeable future, these several million Jews would only be able to live in freedom -- or at all -- in the State of Israel.

So the American Jews placed Israel at the top of their public affairs agenda. But there was also an unhealthy underside to this necessary preoccupation: many American Jews began to turn inwards, away from the American agenda. And as the world's political winds began to blow against Israel, more American Jews began to partake of the embattled philosophy that nobody would or could help Jews except Jews. They would have to go it alone. That was not only a generally suicidal tendency, but also one that turned them away from the temperament of coalition.

There was also an ideological development in the Black population in the late 1960s. There was the fierce surge of Black assertiveness, long overdue, and necessary to the achievement of many Black aspirations. It took various forms. Partly there was an impulse towards separatism even in social action -- which, in itself, would have interrupted the coalition for some period in any case. And partly it also became naturally attached to an American Black identification with the Black African struggle for freedom.

But there was also an unhealthy underside to this development. Some rigid ideologies developed on the Black intellectual fringes which accepted the notion that Israel was instrument of American imperialism -- and therefore to be dealt with, like America, as the mortal enemy of the Third World and Third World freedom. Since American Jews