

TOPICS

The Insensitives— “Neutral” on Anti-Semitism

EARL RAAB

In our agony, it is possible to mistake the real relationship between American anti-Semitism and American Nazis.

Several months ago, a group of irate Jews confronted the management of a San Francisco television station. The head of the local Nazis had been interviewed the night before; there had been an arguably legitimate news reason for the interview. During the interview the local *fuehrer* had slipped in the blood libel: “This is the time of year when the Jews commit their blood sacrifice; Christian children begin to disappear” and so forth.

By what measure of editorial judgment, asked the Jews, had this hoary and gratuitous slander been allowed to remain in the filmed interview? The management set out a series of defenses: news handling is sacrosanct; there was no malicious intent on the part of the station; the Jews are over-reacting to an event which is over and done with. The climax of the meeting was this approximate exchange:

“Do you consider that your news department is in the business of exposing the Nazis?”

“No, we’re neutral.”

The word “neutral” is not approximate; it is the exact word that was used. Some members of the Jewish delegation were immediately struck with the image of a great debate taking place between the Jews and the Nazis—with the TV station standing by as a detached third party, objectively reporting on that parochial struggle.

That “third party” note was sounded by another local TV station, which editorialized on the trashing of the Nazi book store by a small group of Nazi camp survivors and their families. These anti-Nazis, said the editorial commentator, “exhibited

a mentality as ruthless and primitive as the one they were attacking.” In that fashion was the calculated demolition of millions of people equated with the minor property damage done by some of its angry victims. Even those who most disapproved of the trashing knew that there was something pathological about that equation as the main burden of a TV editorial.

That kind of media pathology was further illuminated by another, more recent incident. A cartoon by Oliphant, syndicated by the *Washington Star*, appeared in a number of newspapers around the country, including one in San Francisco. This was the cartoon which depicted Secretary of State Vance entering a pawn-shop, bearing a dove of peace which he presumably wanted to peddle. The hook-nosed pawnbroker, one “Menny Begin,” was saying that he didn’t have need for such an item.

The reference to Israel’s apparent intransigency is not quite the point; neither is the classic anti-Semitic stereotype which Oliphant chose to use. The point is, again, the reaction of media management.

The newspaper editor responsible for publishing the Oliphant cartoon in San Francisco was not as callow as the TV management had been. He admitted that, in approving the publication of the cartoon, he had thought it “amusing.” But then he apologized, at least to the delegation which had come to call. This was a civilized man who had worked for O.W.I. during World War II, analyzing and combating Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda. He mused, apparently self-startled: “I am wondering why, having spent so much time poring over anti-Semitic stereotype-cartoons, I did not recognize and react to this one.”

Still, the public apology was never made.

The newspaper made a slight editorial comment that the cartoon had apparently offended a number of people, but surely no malice was intended. In other words, the dear Jews are being overly sensitive again.

Something is obviously happening. None of these incidents could have taken place, say, fifteen years ago. The local Nazis could have marched then; indeed, they did. And Oliphant cartoons might have been published. But the official mood of media representatives would have been quite different. What has happened?

It is time to remind ourselves again that, when it comes to anti-Semitism, the world is imperfectly divided into three classes: The Monsters, the Indifferents and the Insensitives. The Monsters are, of course, epitomized by the Nazis and their like. They actively hate Jews. The Indifferents don't actively hate Jews—not to begin with, anyway. They just don't care, one way or another. The classic image of the Indifferent was captured in a nation-wide survey a few years ago. Americans were asked about their reactions to a hypothetical candidate for Congress, who was running partly on an anti-Semitic platform. Would that aspect of his platform cause them to vote for him, against him, or wouldn't it make any difference? Only about 5 percent said they would vote for the candidate because he was anti-Semitic, but about a third of the American people said that "it wouldn't make any difference." In other words, if the rest of his platform was acceptable to them—be it tax reform or full employment—they would painlessly accept his program against the Jews—or any other group.

It is not that the Indifferents are committed anti-Semites: they are just not committed to any values which would deter them from harming Jews. The mass base of modern anti-Semitic movements is made up of such Indifferents. That was demonstrably true, for example, of the Coughlinite movement, America's largest anti-Semitic movement; it was undoubtedly true of the German population of the 1930s. It is the mass base of the Indifferents which makes anti-Semitic move-

ments politically operable and effective.

The Insensitives, on the other hand, are committed and conscious opponents of anti-Semitism; they just don't seem to recognize it when they see it, at least, not until it is too late. The Insensitives would vote *against* that anti-Semitic Congressional candidate; and, they would man the barricades against the Nazis; but they would also chuckle at the Oliphant cartoon.

The Insensitives are found, statistically, in the more educated sector of the population. The positive value commitments which distinguish them from the Indifferents in these matters, are characteristic of the more educated. Consequently, while the influential people in our society are not necessarily insensitive, the insensitive are disproportionately influential.

In fact, along with the merely pathological, there is always a band of the more educated among the Monsters. Ideological systems, good or bad, tend to be the property of the more educated. In America today, however, the more educated tend not to be the Monsters. By the conventional measures of anti-Semitism taken in recent years, college graduates customarily reject systematic anti-Semitism by a ratio of about six to one; twice the ratio of rejection by high school graduates. The conscious rejection of the idea of anti-Semitism is highest among the communicator "intellectual" classes: writers, teachers, television and newspaper journalists, high-ranking public officials. The Insensitives are found disproportionately among these influentials, and therein lies their special significance. Given ripe circumstances, a mass anti-Semitic movement develops when enough Monsters have persuaded enough Indifferents to follow them; and, critically, when enough Insensitive influentials have permitted it to happen. In order of danger, the Monsters are least, and the Insensitives most.

Most disturbing is the image of that San Francisco newspaper editor having *turned* insensitive; it parallels the increasingly documented suspicion that America is turning insensitive in the matter of anti-Semitism. This turn started happening be-

fore our eyes a little over a decade ago; there is nothing mysterious about its genesis. The influentials of America had only become sensitized to anti-Semitism during the era of World War II, stretching at most from the middle 1930s to the middle 1960s. Somewhere in those 1960s, the era of World War II ended. To be sure, a generation unborn during America's active combat with Nazism was coming of age. But that, in itself, would not answer the riddle of our newspaper editor. More important, the foreign affairs focus of the nation shifted from the experience of World War II to the experience of the Vietnamese War. And the spectrum of sensitivities held by America's influentials, shifted also because of the domestic scene. A 1960s article entitled "The Black Revolution and the Jewish Question" did not hold that Jews were threatened by black anti-Semitism—but rather that there was a breakdown in democratic restraint associated with the so-called "revolution" which augured ill for American Jews.

The fact is that we were no longer seen as the "poor Jews," the victims who had suffered as a monument to fascist brutality, and to Western society's brutality before that. In America we had visibly "made it." And another event of the 1960s, the Six-Day War, ironically seemed to achieve the Zionist ambition of normalizing Jewish existence on the world scene. In a week's time we lost our victim status there as well. The euphoria of America's influentials joined with ours; their admiration was heaped upon us. But their euphoria was partly constituted of great relief: the Jews, the persecuted, that particular Christian package of guilt, were off their backs and their consciences, their victims no more.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as that. These influentials turned insensitive are not just amnesiac Bourbons, having forgotten what they knew; they had apparently learned imperfectly in the first place. Many of them had never become intellectually sensitive to the condition of the Jews, so much as they had become *sentimental* about the condition of the Jews; and sentimentality is as dangerous a trap in politi-

cal thought as it is in literature. Now it was no longer mandatory to be sentimental about the poor Jews. During the World War II era, overt anti-Semitic expression had gone underground. All the survey literature indicates that anti-Semitic stereotypes and beliefs survived in their underground reservoir; there was some erosion of their prevalence over the years, but not of an order which was either radical or irreversible. Largely because of the influence of the influentials, the expression of anti-Semitism was not fashionable, and did not usually reach the formal channels of communication.

Anti-Semitism came out of the closet in the 1960s, after the close of the World War II era, at the initial impulse not of the right but of the left, broadly defined. Jews were shocked by the anti-Semitic expressions which emerged from the New York teachers' fight and which were broadcast by the media. They were shocked by the anti-Semitic expression out of the campus new left. Then they were shocked by General Brown's statements about the Jews and their control of the media. But it was already clear that the influentials had become more immune than before to that kind of shock. Brown was not fired; tongues clucked, but in between apologetics and friendly suggestions that the dear Jews shouldn't be overly sensitive. By definition the less sensitive must feel that the more sensitive are overly sensitive. By 1977, the public complaint by a Los Angeles branch of the NAACP about the Jews' control of the mass media didn't create that much of a ripple, except among Jews; nor did the Oliphant cartoon.

Fashions had changed, and so had sentimentalities. And what too many of the influentials had *not* become sensitized to, was the real meaning of the Jew as victim. The Jews were not victims because they were poor, bedraggled, insulted, beaten, burned. These were just the consequent attributes of their victimization. Jews, rich or poor, are arch victims of a given political society because *all* people are victims of that political society. It is a kind of worldly version of the Christian metaphor—the Jew dies for the sins of political man.

They are victims not so much of social injustice, as of political tyranny; of political intolerance for the stiff-necked pursuit of individual or group difference of any kind. That basic understanding should no longer need elaboration for the historically sophisticated.

But the Insensitives have not just forgotten; apparently they never really understood. They see that American Jews are well-fed, well-housed, well-jobbed, and that the homeless Jews of the world even have their own nation. Therefore they do not see the significance of anti-Semitism; and they do not recognize its signs. The Insensitives are not most importantly that because of an esthetic insensitivity to the feelings of Jews. More important, they are insensitive to the still vibrant meaning of anti-Semitism in history, *their* history. Jews are assessed as being overly sensitive to something that happened to *them*; and in the past. "Why don't we forget it; it's all over," said the TV station manager. It was something that happened between the Nazis and the Jews, he said, "and we are neutral." "How could I not have noticed," mused the newspaper editor, who, on second thought, apparently decided that the Jews were more overly sensitive than he was forgetful. Maybe he never really knew. Maybe the society is not just forgetting; maybe it never really knew.

There is relevance to the current efforts to raise consciousness about the German Nazis. In the post-War extension of the World War II period, just as anti-Semitic expression was muted, so was attention to Nazis. There were, in those years, American Nazi groups, uniforms, meetings, leaflets. They received some media attention, but they were more often treated as two-headed freaks than as political entities; they caused little panic. After all, if the Nazis had just been crushed, and anti-Semitism was dead, how could they be taken seriously?

However, the World War II era ended sometime in the 1960s. Anti-Semitism began to bubble to society's surface. Jewish sensitivity, at least, was aroused.

The various American Nazi groups were not substantially larger in numbers than

they had been in preceding decades, and almost nobody really believed that they were about to become a significant force in America. But they and the Swastika they bore were, after all, the symbol of anti-Semitism—and, as such, pricked the re-aroused sensitivity of American Jews. Still the question was not so much the Nazis themselves—losers all—but how the society was going to react to these symbolic bearers of anti-Semitism. The reactions were sometimes dismaying. That is the significance of comments by influentials about "neutrality" or the equation of Nazis with scofflaws who trash a Nazi book store. What has been revealed is not any growth in sympathy for the Nazis; but a level of insensitivity to the significance of anti-Semitism which is even more alarming.

It was not just the communications industry which was afflicted; so was the educational industry. The Sensitives on this issue, Jewish and otherwise, began to learn one of the dismaying effects of the era's ending: young people know little about the fact of German Nazism, much less its meaning.

Late-night movies were carrying the burden of this education. In one junior high school survey in San Francisco, these old movies were found to be the major source of knowledge on this subject. What did they know about Hitler? "When he came into the hall," one student explained, "the crowd would rise and yell: 'Hi, Hitler.'" The Nazi fanfare and strut had come across. One recalls the current Nazi leader of Jewish ancestry and Skokie fame who reports that he became a Nazi after seeing the Nazis portrayed in an A.D.L. anti-Nazi film. But that was his personally demented bent. Generally, the film-educated students know that Hitler was a "bad guy," and had been involved in some ancient persecution of Jews. But that was about it.

All this is one reason for the tumbling activity around the country to refresh and re-seed America's memory of the Nazis. In some cities, the mayors are setting aside a week "to remember"; there will be public ceremonies; TV and radio stations will concentrate on anti-Nazi programming; ministers will teach throughout the year;

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in school systems all over the country, there will be new curricular attention, new teacher training, new programs addressed to remembering; and Holocaust conferences will multiply.

These are efforts to make the Indifferent less indifferent; and especially to re-sensitize the Insensitivities. But a serious error could be made in these efforts if they are not informed by the nature of that Insensitivity.

It is not the image of the "poor, persecuted Jew" which needs resurrection. Although the Jews must—and some Christian theologians must—the world will no longer weep over the Nazi victims. World War II is over as a sentient experience.

It is not sentimentality about the Jews

that needs revival. Sentimental revivals, out of courtesy, will not be durable, as our older Insensitives currently demonstrate. Needed is an intellectual sensitivity to the meaning of the Nazi experience—and, indeed the Soviet experience—for all their victims—and the special role of anti-Semitism in these experiences. Somehow the Insensitives (and many Jews) have to be impressed with the universal importance of anti-Semitism, not just its application to one suffering people. If that cannot be done, then Insensitivity is the finger cloud on the horizon.

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Notes on the Jews of New Orleans

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"If you include the Jews in your conference on Ethnicity in New Orleans," the letter read, "you should include Baptists and Methodists as well. We constitute a religious group," my correspondent, a native of this city and a Jew, continued, "not a race, and not an ethnic group." She was sending our brochure back, and would certainly not attend.

From earliest times, the Jews of New Orleans have endeavored to blend into the cultural scenery, to merge with the manners, habits and customs of Southern high society, the better to obscure their ethnic selves. The community stayed away from our conference completely. This came as no surprise to me; not only had I seen the irate lady's letter, but I had also trudged up and down exclusive St. Charles Avenue, visiting the massive, church-cold temples there, and attempting to speak with rabbis and program directors. The rabbis would not speak with me, and the program directors eyed me with suspicion. Ethnicity indeed!

New Orleans Jews are quick to proclaim their loyalty to, and affiliation with, the culture of their city. At the Jewish New Year, shops closed discreetly "for the holidays." It is well-nigh impossible to find rye bread, much less a water bagel. While nine-tenths of the antique stores on Royal Street bear

Jewish names, I have never seen anybody there in *yarmulke* and *pais*. A mischievous acquaintance tells me that all one needs to do in order to scandalize New Orleans Jewry is to wear a skullcap on occasion. Few wear a *chai*, and fewer a star.

Historically, the camouflage makes sense. The early settlers came primarily from Western Europe. Sephardim who had weathered the Inquisition by fleeing to countries the Enlightenment had reached—England, France, Holland, Germany, and the British colonies of the New World—they were removed from the correlative of the *shetel* and the Inquisition had made discretion, if not secrecy, in the proclamation of one's identity second nature. Moreover, those who chose a predominantly French Catholic outpost far from New World centers of Jewish culture such as Charleston seemed to have sought out an environment in which identification with their forebears could only hinder them. What the early settlers were after—fortune, adventure, social position, power, freedom from religious constrictions Judaic or Christian—would be brought no closer if they donned the gabardine.

Moreover, New Orleans is, and has been always, a port city, with all that term connotes. Like the frontier towns, it was in cer-