

## THE PERILOUS FUTURE OF AMERICAN JEWISH PUBLIC AFFAIRS

American Jewish political action has reached a new peak in this political year. And so has Jewish self-satisfaction. But if not illusory, the success may be short-range. Jewish public affairs action -- that is, political action, community relations action -- is becoming more irrelevant to American Jewish public affairs goals: maintaining Jewish security and equal Jewish status in America; helping to save beleaguered Jews abroad; preserving American support for Israel.

It is not that the broad principles underlying those public affairs goals have changed. But we are often frozen in the past because we confuse principles with strategies, and confuse both with the titles we have given them. It is no longer useful to ask whether we have or should become more "liberal" or more "conservative"; more "hawkish" or more "dovish"; more "unified" or more "pluralistic." Too much reliance on these titles evades the changing nature of the issues and deepens irrelevancy.

There are three arenas in which to examine the growing inutility of Jewish public affairs activity. One is American Jewish activity on behalf of Israel; the second is American Jewish activity on domestic issues; and the third is the possibility that, despite appearances to the contrary, our public affairs organizational system is deteriorating, or at least not keeping up with the new needs.

It may seem peculiar that concerns are being raised at this time about American support of Israel, and the strength of American Jewish organization on behalf of that support. After all, the Congress is in the process of passing the largest and most advantageous aid package ever received by Israel, backed by both the incumbent administration and its adversarial leadership. The incumbent administration is engaged in negotiating the most comprehensive military cooperation package yet formally conceived for the two nations. The major politicians of both parties are, in public, saying only the kindest things about Israel. On the organizational side: pro-Israel PACs have multiplied, having given about 5 million dollars to candidates last year. The membership and reputation of AIPAC have also multiplied.

But while there is often a relationship between American support of Israel and American Jewish activity on behalf of Israel, that relationship can be exaggerated. It is not an infallible, automatic relationship.

Direct political activity on behalf of Israel is essential, but it may not be enough ... not enough to save Israel. American policy on Israel is primarily a function of American foreign policy in general ... Israel's survival will depend more on the shape of American foreign policy in general than on any disembodied American feelings -- of like or dislike -- towards Israel itself.

There should be nothing very startling about this proposition. We have always understood, for example, that if the U.S. entered economic bankruptcy, we would not be able to help Israel, no matter how well-disposed America or Americans were towards Israel. And we have always understood that, if the U.S. should ever again be clothed with some serious mood of isolationism, we would not be able to help Israel, no matter how well-disposed America or Americans were towards Israel. We do not have to dig too hard in American history to find models for such possible conditions.

It would be a serious mistake for us to assume that Israel is an untouchable exception to America's larger foreign policy considerations. What are those considerations?

America, by and large, remains gravely patriotic, an old-fashioned term whose meaning in this country is heavily laced with a commitment to certain political ideas and institutions. While recent evidence suggests that Americans have lost considerable confidence in the people who run their political institutions, the fundamental commitment to the values which underlie those institutions is still strong in the American mainstream. At least four out of five Americans today believe that America has "a special role to play in the world," with respect to those American political values.

There is a strong sense of the need to protect American national interest abroad. That national interest abroad has something to do with the nature of America and its political values at home -- and with a preference for allies whose political values are compatible with those of America. By the same token, it is a fact that the central enemy of that American national interest abroad is pervasively seen as an expansionist Soviet Union, with its ideas and institutions. There are at play here strong ideas of freedom and anti-freedom, however rough and unsophisticated they may seem at times.

It is into this configuration that American support of Israel fits. The indispensable basis of American support of Israel is the perception of Israel as important to American national interest. The fact is that American public support was lowest after World War II, when Israel was established as a refuge for victims of Nazism-- and that support grew, not as a sentimental gesture, but as a direct result of events which helped to demonstrate Israel's importance to American national interest.

Thus, if we are going to be most effective in promoting American support for Israel, we are going to have to most cogently integrate that support for Israel with American foreign policy in general. Such an integration was uniquely dramatic

during the World War II period, when we were the white-hats in a Manichean struggle with the most explicit and overt enemy of democracy, human rights and political freedom: the Nazis. The self-image emerged of a powerful democratic and free American society with a responsibility for protecting those political ideals in the world. And, indeed, we acted out that image in our postwar policies in Western Europe and Japan.

However, the world scene is no longer so simple. The dangers out there to human rights, democracy and political freedom are more subtle than those posed by Hitler. The world scene no longer allows the U.S. the kind of power it once wielded. The U.S. has faltered and made grave errors on the world scene.

And despite the continuing public commitment to basic American values, to America's national interest abroad and even to the belief that America has a special role to play in the world -- there has long been evidence of a prevalent ambivalence between those commitments, and, on the other hand, a deepset, even historic, American aversion to foreign entanglements which might mean military involvement. That ambivalence has grown sharper in recent years.

The two poles of that ambivalence are often called interventionism and isolationism -- and there are ideological movements on both poles, although they are mixed in nature. But most Americans simply struggle from day to day between their commitment to American values and national interest on the one hand, and their reluctance to get militarily embroiled on the other. The nature of that ambivalence is shaped by the course of events.

It has always been weakened by acts of Soviet expansionism, and intensified by American failure on the world scene. Twice as many Americans were willing to use military force to protect Japan and South Korea in 1980, on the heels of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, than were willing to do so in 1974. But American failures in foreign policy, as in Vietnam, sharpened the ambivalence.

That ambivalence applies to Israel as well. While the popularity of the Israeli cause over the Arab cause remains high in America, that popularity does not in itself indicate the degree of sacrifice that Americans would make to save Israel under given adverse circumstances. Attempts to measure that kind of selectivity have always come up with the fact that Canada, Mexico, England, the Philippines and West Germany always rate well over Israel.

All of this has to do not with ambivalence about Israel itself, but with ambivalence about American foreign policy in general, which could threaten Israel. A pattern of American debacle and failure of influence, such as in Lebanon or in Central America, could lead to a further swing towards ambivalence, especially if American confusion about the nature of American foreign policy becomes more rampant.

That is why we cannot be sanguine about an American support of Israel which is not based on a strong compatible American foreign policy in general. America's support of Israel remains strong today, but that is because the basic framework of commitment to American national interest abroad is still strong enough, as is the acceptance of Israel's importance to that national interest; and an effective pro-Israel political movement operates within that framework. But that political movement could not prevail so easily if the framework of American foreign policy were to weaken considerably -- and the possibility is not abstract.

As a small straw in the wind, take the vote this past year on foreign aid, the chief beneficiary being Israel. Israel wanted and American supporters of Israel pushed hard for a favorable vote. But a large number of Israel's closest Congressional friends voted against the aid bill for the first time. They did so because of amendments to the foreign aid bill which had to do with Central America. Of course, these friends of Israel suggest that they would probably have found some other way to get aid to Israel if the bill had failed -- but the point is that they voted against aid to Israel in that instance not because of hostility to Israel, but because of larger considerations of American foreign policy, as they saw it.

But is there any legitimate American Jewish perspective on American foreign policy in general? The fact is that American Jews have long claimed such a perspective on foreign policy in general, in the very course of urging American support for Israel. American Jewish spokesmen have not said that American public policy-makers should support Israel because of the domestic political strength of American Jews. Indeed, they have denied that line of argument, because it is a favorite one of Israel's enemies. Instead the American Jewish line of argument is exactly that America should support Israel because of American national interest. And that, in fact, is the primary reason that America has supported Israel.

But why is support of Israel in America's interest? Is it because Israel is America's only reliable and viable military ally in the Middle East? That is a reason, surely, but it is a somewhat fragile one. If Israel were to have no military mission in the Middle East, that reason would evaporate.

If Middle East oil were to become less important to America's friends, as it has become less important to the U.S., then that reason would evaporate. If America became more isolationist in its general stance in the world, that reason would evaporate. There always was a better understanding of Israel's importance to American national interest, a better integration of American support of Israel into the total structure of American foreign policy. And there is a relevant American Jewish perspective on that American foreign policy.

The basis of such a larger perspective is not just that the U.S. is a free society, but that for various historical reasons America has brought the idea of individual and political freedom, human rights, the open society and democratic pluralism to their highest point in history. Despite the shameful failures of this country in these qualities in the past, present and undoubtedly in the future, these qualities are its political essence. They embody the essential American Idea.

The world survival of these qualities, in the foreseeable future, depends upon the survival and leadership of the U.S. as a free nation. And the fate and survival of Jews everywhere depend particularly on the survival of that American Idea. In the ancient and medieval worlds, the Jews could often survive within despotic societies. Such survival is less likely in the efficient and ideological world of modern despotism.

In a narrower vein, Israel as a nation can probably only survive in the foreseeable future with the economic, military and diplomatic aid of America. And that support will only be forthcoming from an America which is seeking to protect itself as the citadel of the American Idea.

But, of course, that kind of dynamic presupposes the existence of forces in the world which are antithetical to the American Idea, and which are expansionist in ways that threaten the U.S. or its free allies. To actively defend against the imperialistic expansion of such forces is the basis of an American foreign policy marked by enlightened self-interest. It is the kind of cogent American foreign policy which is needed to protect Israel as well as America. It is the framework of an American foreign policy within which is defined that national interest which legitimates American support of Israel.

To advance this vision into the practical, let us delineate two idealistic principles of American foreign policy -- idealistic in that they are designed to reflect America's meaning, to further human rights and political freedom in the world. One principle is simply for American foreign policy to encourage the practice of human rights and political freedom, and to discourage its violation, wherever possible. The other principle is to actively defend against the imperialistic expansion of totalitarian and despotic forces when that expansion threatens the U.S. or its free allies. The latter is easily as important as the first to the goal of furthering human rights and political freedom around the world.

Those two idealistic principles are obviously sometimes in conflict. They were in conflict during World War II when we actively supported, economically and militarily, a totalitarian society whose violation of human rights had been and was at the time massive and intensive -- the Soviet Union: millions killed,

millions in concentration camps. We supported that brutal society -- properly and necessarily -- because it was the totalitarian Nazi Germany which at the time was imperialistically threatening the U.S. and its free allies. As Franklin D. Roosevelt once said of a South American dictator: "He's a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch."

Establishing these two idealistic principles in re human rights does not yet establish exactly what position we should take in every situation -- in Lebanon or Central America or anyplace else. There may be different judgments, for example, as to whether a given situation abroad is strictly internal, although threatening human rights; or an expansionist act threatening the U.S. and the principle of human rights. In a given situation, there are different strategic and tactical judgments to be made.

We do not have, and are not likely to have, a Jewish consensus on those specific judgments of fact or tactic. However, we do have a Jewish perspective on the general role of America in the world, within which perspective various disparate strategic judgments can come into play. That Jewish perspective might have been expressed by Woodrow Wilson on September 4, 1919 when he said: "We don't stand off and see murder done. We do not profess to be the champions of liberty and then consent to see liberty destroyed. We are not the friends and advocates of free government and then willingly stand by and see free government die before our eyes."

In fact, if we don't have such a basic perspective on American foreign policy in general, then our argument for American support of Israel is fundamentally weak -- and destined to become weaker.

It will become weaker insofar as an isolationist mood grows in this country; insofar as America registers hesitant failures in Central America, the Middle East and elsewhere; and insofar as Israel's importance to American national interest in the Middle East requires a stronger understanding. Under those conditions, the narrow American Jewish political apparatus on behalf of Israel will not prevail.