

The Israel Lobby Controversy

Elite Factionalism or Elite Conspiracy Theory?

“The criticism surrounding *The Israel Lobby* paper was sparked by the fact that two card-carrying members of the American intellectual establishment finally pointed out the elephant in the room.”

by **Will Banyan**

The publication in March 2006 of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, as a working paper for the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and as an article in the *London Review of Books*, aroused much comment in the American media and academia -- most condemnatory. The authors, academics John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago, and Stephen Walt from Harvard University, have had their work widely dismissed as being both conspiratorial and anti-Semitic.

"[T]his paper is anti-Semitic" declared Professor Eliot Cohen from Johns Hopkins University, in the *Washington Post* (April 5, 2006); nor was it "research in any serious sense," claimed Marty Peretz in *The New Republic*, but "the labor of obsessives with dark and conspiratorial minds." According to Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, the authors shared with white supremacist David Duke "the same interest in vilifying Jewish leaders and spouting conspiracy theories about Zionist plots against American interests" (Dershowitz 41). Even Stephen Zunes, a left-wing critic of U.S. support for Israel, implied that in subscribing to an "exaggerated claim of Jewish clout," Mearsheimer and Walt were "flirting with anti-Semitism" (Zunes 2006a, 15).

At the same time, there were some observers who were clearly overjoyed at the appearance of *The Israel Lobby* as it seemed to confirm their belief that the U.S. is, in fact, ruled by a "Zionist Occupation Government," or some other sinister Jewish cabal. David Duke, for example, praised it for having "told the truth about the proverbial gorilla in the room: the Zionist lobby and its enormous political and media power" (Duke 2006). *The Israel Lobby*, claimed a commentator for Rense.com, left "absolutely no doubt that Israel not only controls our entire government, our Pentagon, our foreign policy and our political parties, but our media as well" (Lang 2006).

Missing from these critiques and the praise -- most of which represented the paper as a conspiratorial account of Jewish influence over U.S. foreign policy -- was any acknowledgement of Mearsheimer and Walt's careful caveats to the contrary. Some were explicit: "the Lobby's activities are not a conspiracy of the sort depicted in tracts like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*." To be sure, Mearsheimer and Walt attribute to the Lobby an "ability to manipulate the American political system," but they stress that it is *not* "a unified movement with central leadership," but an ethnic lobby; one of many, though arguably the most successful (Mearsheimer and Walt 14-16).

According to Walt, the firestorm of criticism surrounding *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* was not sparked by what they said, but by "the fact that two card-carrying members of the American intellectual establishment finally pointed out the elephant in the room" (*Washington Times*, August 29, 2006). But *why* did they say it?

Aside from viewing *The Israel Lobby* controversy as confirming the unpalatable anti-Semitic nightmares of David Duke and others, there are from a conspiratorial perspective at least two more plausible ways of interpreting the storm.

The first is to see *The Israel Lobby* as a well-crafted attempt to divert blame for the costly debacle that the invasion of Iraq has become from the rest of the Establishment, especially the oil lobby, to the age-old scapegoat, the Jews (Zunes 2006a; Peretz 2006). In this counter-narrative Israel is the victim. Consider Zunes' commentary on Israel's recent attack on Lebanon -- a military adventure he suggests Israel instigated "largely at the behest of the United States" -- where Israel is painted as a U.S. "proxy in the Middle East." Zunes contends this use of Israel "corresponds to historic anti-Semitism" with the ruling elite using the Jews as the "most visible agents of the oppressive social order," who were always "convenient scapegoats" when the elites were seeking to redirect the anger of the restive masses. So now the scapegoating continues, evident in the blame placed on the "Zionist lobby" by Establishment critics (Zunes 2006b).

The second and more plausible interpretation (in this author's opinion) is that the Mearsheimer-Walt paper is another salvo in an ongoing struggle between competing elites for control of the War on Terror. Rather than the U.S. power-elite being a monolithic entity, the increasingly shrill dispute over *The Israel Lobby* paper reveals that the fissures at the highest levels of the food chain have become deep and suppurating.

Rather than being a crude attempt to unfairly smear a single ethnic lobby, there really is an Israel Lobby (as AIPAC's own website proudly attests), which has been successful (despite some exaggerations), and not surprisingly its agenda is opposed by elements in the Establishment. The paper suggested that the usual suspects in most conspiratorial accounts of the "New World Order" -- the Council on Foreign Relations, Trilateral Commission and Bilderbergers -- have some serious competition when it comes to influencing American foreign policy.

Continuing on with the argument raised in an earlier piece (Banyan 2006), it is the contention of this article that while the Mearsheimer-Walt article perhaps overstates the influence of the Israel Lobby, it exposes an aspect of elite factionalism missing from most mainstream and alternative narratives of the seemingly endless War on Terror.

The Ultimate Ethnic Lobby

At 82 pages including nearly 40 pages of footnotes, *The Israel Lobby* is an impressive tome, though inevitably controversial due to its central contention that a lobby group based in America's Jewish community has distorted U.S. foreign policy. Mearsheimer and Walt are unequivocal, asserting that the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the Middle East is due "almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics ... especially the activities of the 'Israel Lobby'." In fact, they state, no other lobby groups have "managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest."

Israel, Mearsheimer and Walt point out, has been the recipient of an extraordinary amount of aid from the U.S., totaling some \$140 billion since the early 1970s. The U.S. has also given Israel privileged access to its intelligence and turned a blind eye towards its covert nuclear program. Yet despite this generous aid, which far exceeds that given to poorer countries, Israel has become a "strategic burden" to America. Continuing U.S. support for Israel has antagonized Arab oil states and has been one of the key factors in motivating terrorists, especially Osama bin Laden, to attack Americans at home and abroad (Mearsheimer and Walt 4-5).

Despite these costs, U.S. support is assured because of the "unmatched power of the Israel Lobby," described as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations" which actively works "to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction" (p. 14). The "most powerful and well-known" organization in the Israel Lobby is the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), ranked by members of Congress in 1997 as the second most powerful lobby active in Washington DC. AIPAC is a "*de facto* agent for a foreign government" claim Mearsheimer and Walt, which has a "stranglehold on the U.S. Congress" (pp. 15, 18).

Mearsheimer and Walt assert that AIPAC's power stems from its ability to "reward legislators and congressional candidates who support its agenda, and to punish those who challenge it." Others have confirmed this contention. Michael Massing, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, for instance, notes that AIPAC has a "formidable network of supporters throughout the U.S.," comprising 100,000 members, nine regional offices, ten satellite offices, a Washington office with 100 staff and an annual budget of \$47 million (Massing 67). But according to Massing, AIPAC's real power lies not in its direct lobbying of Congressmen, but in its ability to control the flow of campaign financing:

A candidate will contact AIPAC and express strong sympathies with Israel. AIPAC will point out that it doesn't endorse candidates but will offer to introduce him to people who do. Someone affiliated with AIPAC will be assigned to the candidate to act as a contact person. Checks for \$500 or \$1,000 from pro-Israel donors will be bundled together and provided to the candidate with a clear indication of the donors' political views (p. 67).

Failing to toe the pro-Israel line, however, can cut short a Congressional career; those candidates who challenge AIPAC "can find their funds suddenly dry up," while their opponents receive generous funding from pro-Israeli sources (Massing 67). But the Lobby is not just AIPAC, it's also represented by a host of think tanks in Washington DC. Aside from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, founded by the Lobby in 1985, "pro-Israel forces" have, according to Mearsheimer and Walt:

...established a commanding presence at the American Enterprise Institute, the Brookings Institution, the Center for Security Policy, the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA). These think tanks employ few, if any, critics of U.S. support for Israel (pp. 21-22).

The Lobby also has "significant leverage over the executive branch," partly due to the disproportionate influence of Jewish voters and financial contributors on presidential elections (Mearsheimer and Walt 18). Another factor is the presence of "fervently" pro-Israel individuals in important positions in the executive branch -- such as Martin Indyk and Dennis Ross during the Clinton Administration; and Elliot Abrams, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz in the Bush Administration -- while opponents are generally excluded (Mearsheimer and Walt 17-19).

To achieve its goals -- described by Massing as, "a powerful Israel free to occupy the territory it chooses; enfeebled Palestinians; and unquestioning support for Israel by the United States" -- the Lobby, especially AIPAC, makes a lot of "background noise," mobilizing the media and Congress to pressure the White House into pursuing policies favorable to Israel (Massing 67-68). There are numerous examples:

- In his *Memoirs*, President Nixon blamed an "unyielding and shortsighted pro-Israeli attitude prevalent in large and influential segments of the American Jewish community, Congress, the media, and in intellectual and cultural circles," for undermining his attempt to create a more "balanced" Middle East policy (p. 481).
- In 1975 President Ford was forced to retreat from his six-month suspension of aid to Israel after a campaign by AIPAC, including a letter signed by 76 senators "confirming their support for Israel" (Blankfort 2003, pp. 4-5).
- AIPAC has been linked to the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, a piece of legislation apparently designed to disrupt the Oslo accords by trying to shift the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Massing, pp. 67-68).
- In a 2005 speech, former President George H. W. Bush suggested AIPAC was partly to blame for his electoral defeat in 1992 by campaigning against him (Desch 2006, p. 28).

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Lobby, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, has been the invasion of Iraq in 2003. They assert that "pressure" from the Israel Lobby was a "critical factor" behind the invasion, which was part of a "larger plan to reorder the Middle East"; in fact, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was "motivated in good part by a desire to make Israel more secure," rather than a push to dominate the region's oil. They note that a number of Bush Administration officials, including Perle, Feith and David Wurmser, were co-authors of the *Clean Break* report of 1996 for then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu which recommended ousting Saddam (Mearsheimer and Walt 30-35).

The Lobby also works to suppress commentary critical of Israel, including manipulating the media, stifling debate on university campuses, and labeling as anti-Semites those who suggest the pro-Israel Lobby has excessive influence. "In fact," they observe, "anyone who says that there is an Israel Lobby runs the risk of being charged with anti-Semitism" (Mearsheimer and Walt 6, 24). It seems to have been self-fulfilling prophecy. According to one observer, the Lobby "produced an attempt to silence discussion and discredit the authors, sometimes employing character assassination and the technique of guilt by association" (Pfaff 2006).

Mearsheimer and Walt have also been tarred as propagandists in the pay of the Arabs. Some overtly pro-Israel commentators linked publication of *The Israel Lobby* to a \$20 million grant to Harvard from Saudi Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal. More recently, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, derided Mearsheimer and Walt as "handmaidens of the Arab propaganda machine" for speaking at an event organised by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) (*Jewish Telegraph*, August 29, 2006).

The Elephant in the Room

The Mearsheimer-Walt paper is by no means the first attempt by Establishment representatives to criticize the Israel Lobby. In 2002, for example, Michael Lind, a former editor of *The National Interest*, wrote in *Prospect* magazine about the "disproportionate influence of the Israel lobby," claiming that its efforts were "distort[ing] U.S. foreign policy." Two years later, Anatol Lieven, a former journalist with the London *Times* and at the time a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, criticised the Lobby in his book *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (2004).

Other critics of note have included George W. Ball, an Undersecretary of State during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, who attacked the Lobby in his book *The Passionate Attachment* (1992), arguing that it had "distorted America's policies and imposed an enormous burden on the nation's economy." No friend of the Lobby, Ball once likened members of Congress to "trained poodles," beholden to Israel's interests, who would "jump dutifully through hoops held by Israel's lobby" (quoted in Findley, p.19). Ball's other credential was as one of the founding members of the Bilderberg group; in fact, he attended every Bilderberg meeting but one from 1954 until his death in 1994 (Ball 52-53).

It was through Bilderberg that Ball first developed his association with another occasional enemy of the Israel Lobby, mega-plutocrat David Rockefeller. Self-confessed believer in a "more integrated global political and economic structure: one world," it was perhaps inevitable that Rockefeller would come to grief with the more limited and parochial objectives of the Israel Lobby; though it would also suit his interests to divert blame for dubious policy choices to such a grouping.

Thus in Rockefeller's 2002 *Memoirs*, we find him agreeing with "expert" opinion that the "end of détente" could be traced to the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1972, which demanded the Soviets lift all restrictions on Jewish emigration in exchange for Most Favored Nation trading status (Rockefeller 236). That Amendment -- conceived by neo-con icon Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson in consultation

with an "informal group on Capitol Hill" led by Perle that was "intensely supportive of Israel" (Isaacson 612) -- was, in Rockefeller's view, a "shortsighted congressional action" (Rockefeller 236).

Rockefeller's autobiography is filled with details of his many meetings with Arab leaders, but he mentions relatively few visits to Israel. In fact, as "one of relatively few Americans" with access to Arab leaders during the early 1970s -- due to his role as President of Chase Manhattan -- David Rockefeller boasts he became a "diplomatic go-between," passing messages between the White House and the Arab world (Rockefeller 272).

This role soon got him into trouble with the Israel Lobby. A *New York Times* report claimed that on December 9, 1969, David Rockefeller and a group of oil executives had allegedly prevailed upon Nixon to adopt a "pro-Arab" position. Rockefeller rejects this characterization, claiming they merely pushed Nixon for a "more balanced U.S. policy" in the Middle East. Secretary of State William Rogers later called on Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders in return for a binding peace with the Arabs. But, laments Rockefeller, Israel "rejected it out of hand" and announced it would open the Arab part of Jerusalem to settlement (Rockefeller 276-78).

A bitter Rockefeller suspected they had been "set-up" by Nixon to be the "scapegoats" if the public turned against Nixon's policy (Rockefeller 278). But worse was to follow when the Chase bank was "swamped" with letters and prominent visitors from New York's Jewish community complaining about Rockefeller's "alleged anti-Israeli bias." A boycott was organized by "several Jewish businessmen" and a "number of important accounts were withdrawn." In January 1970, David Rockefeller issued a public statement clarifying his position, announcing his new found belief the U.S. "must to do everything it can" to support Israel (Rockefeller 279).

There was more to Rockefeller's reversal than meets the eye. Among those complainants Rockefeller met with was Democrat Congressman Ed Koch, who waged a public campaign against the plutocrat, seeking confirmation that he had advised Nixon to adopt a policy "favorable to the Arabs." Koch claims David Rockefeller admitted to making the offending statement, though he insisted it was done in the interest of the U.S., not because of the oil. Informing the plutocrat that his brother, Nelson Rockefeller, had just come out in unequivocal support of Israel, Koch declared his intention to make a public statement about their meeting (Koch). It has been alleged that Nelson's support for Israel was not heartfelt, but was due to the Israeli Mossad blackmailing him for consorting with South American fascists and trading with the enemy during World War II (Loftus and Arons 166-171). In the game of public relations Rockefeller had been checkmated.

David Rockefeller's setback was temporary. He has challenged the Israel Lobby's consensus more than most. An example is his 1999 visit to Israel and the Gaza Strip as part of a CFR delegation, where he met with then Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Rockefeller's account artfully denigrates Israel. He complains of being detained at the border crossing into Gaza by Israeli soldiers for "more than an hour." He describes Arafat as a "charming man," and Gaza as a "ghetto" and "one of the most forlorn places" he had ever visited. As for his Israeli hosts, Barak was a "self-confident, assertive man" who explains why Arafat's demands will be rejected; but whose replacement by the "hardliner" Ariel Sharon threatens "an even wider war" (Rockefeller 409-410).

The Fight Continues

If we pursue this notion of elite factionalism, we might note the consistency of the links among those who have taken issue with the Israel Lobby. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, not only described the neo-cons as "fucking crazies" (quoted in Naughtie, p. 127), but repeatedly suggested their first loyalty was to Israel. Powell reportedly referred to most of Rumsfeld's team as the "JINSA crowd" (*LA Times*, 9 Oct. 2006), and in his exit interview with Bush described Feith as a "card

carrying member of the Likud Party" (Packer 445). Powell, no doubt by mere coincidence, is on record publicly thanking the Lobby's other antagonist, David Rockefeller, for being his "great mentor."

Lawrence Wilkerson, Powell's chief of staff at the State Department, and, since his own retirement, an outspoken critic of the "cabal" around Cheney, has lauded Mearsheimer and Walt's thesis as containing "blinding flashes of the obvious." Wilkerson has reportedly assigned the paper to his students at George Washington University and the College of William and Mary "for discussion" (Amos 2006).

Other odd coincidences and connections also emerge. Anatol Lieven and Michael Lind, after coming under sustained criticism for their attacks on the Lobby, both found refuge at the New American Foundation (NAF). The mission of the NAF, which was founded in January 1999 and describes itself as an "independent, non-partisan, non-profit public policy institute," is to invest in "outstanding individuals and policy ideas that transcend the conventional political spectrum." Lind is currently the Whitehead Senior Fellow at the NAF. Former Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead, who counts Rockefeller as one of his "old friends" (Whitehead, p.7) -- and who has also been publicly lauded as a "friend" by Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage -- is the largest individual donor to the NAF, as well as a public critic of the Bush Administration's policies in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Whitehead also marked himself as an opponent of the Israel Lobby/neo-conservative consensus with his public and private attacks on John Bolton, back in 2004 when Bush nominated him to be Ambassador to the UN. Bolton, a former Senior Vice President at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), received enthusiastic support from AEI, JINSA and the Zionist Organization of America. In addition to the controversial efforts of Colin Powell and Richard Armitage, Whitehead personally lobbied Senators to reject Bolton's nomination.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, long-time Rockefeller acolyte, Trilateral Commission co-founder and lead speaker at a number of NAF forums, praised Walt and Mearsheimer for performing a "public service" by "initiating a much needed public debate" on the role of the Israel Lobby (Brzezinski 63)

Uniting these figures has been their opposition to the invasion of Iraq. On the eve of the invasion, Mearsheimer and Walt (2003, 52) had derided the case for war as "flimsy," arguing instead for the continued containment of Saddam Hussein. Brzezinski had taken issue with the Bush Administration's "demagogic fixation on Iraq" (*Financial Times*, Mar. 4, 2003), warning that invading Iraq may come "at too high a cost to America's global leadership" (*Washington Post*, Feb. 19, 2003). And Lind (2003) found fault with Washington's "failure to come up with a convincing rationale for the war."

Whitehead and Rockefeller also indicated disquiet, though less obviously. Sometime after the invasion, Rockefeller declared his support for Colin Powell's failed attempt to evade war through the UN route (Banyan 2006). Whitehead was a signatory to a letter to Bush from the United Nations Association of the USA (Oct. 25, 2002), which declared its opposition to "unwarranted unilateral military action against Iraq" as a "compelling case has not been made" that Iraq was an imminent threat to the U.S.

The plot thickens further when we see the forces recently arrayed for and against Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island. According to Massing, "pro-Israel forces" were "targeting" Chafee for taking "a number of positions that run counter to AIPAC's" such as voting against the Syria Accountability Act (Massing 67). In early 2006, the founder of the Washington Political Action Committee, former AIPAC executive director Morris Amitay, told the *New York Sun* (Jan. 3, 2006) that they would "like to see the young Chafee retired from the Senate" as he had "one of the worst records of anyone in the Senate" when it came to "pro-Israel initiatives." WPAC had already donated \$5000 dollars to Chafee's GOP challenger, Stephen P. Laffey, whose pro-Israel stance was judged by a Rhode Island paper to be "so strong that it sometimes puts him in the minority" (*Providence Journal*, April 17, 2006).

As the September 12 primary loomed, it was reported that the Republicans Who Care Individual Fund, a group affiliated with the Republican Main Street Partnership, had emerged in support of Chafee, funding a \$100,000 advertising campaign targeting his pro-Israel opponent, Laffey. Patrons of the fund, reported the *Providence Journal* (Sept. 6, 2006), were "some pillars of the old-line GOP establishment," including David Rockefeller (\$25,000) and John C. Whitehead (\$25,000). Whitehead was also a sponsor of a Chafee fundraiser at the Yale Club, hosted by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg on September 5, 2006. This was not enough to save Chafee in the November elections, however, and he was trounced by his Democrat opponent, Sheldon Whitehouse, who received \$31,000 from pro-Israel PACs.

The Split Capstone

Speaking in Washington DC in August 2006 as guests of CAIR, Walt made the point that they never said "the Israel lobby was all powerful." It was "not some secret cabal that controls [U.S.] foreign policy"; rather, there were "countervailing forces out there, though they are much weaker, and the lobby doesn't get its way on every single issue." Walt's important caveats highlight something missing from both the leftist analysis, exemplified by Zunes, and the more traditional conspiratorial analysis, both of which seem to contend that the ruling elites are monolithic and unfractured.

Among conspiracists, particularly those concerned with the New World Order, the dominant assumption is that all groups are so interconnected that the same objective -- world government -- must predominate. Any evidence to the contrary is usually dismissed as a contrivance designed to deceive the public, or as a grubby squabble for control of the same project. David Icke, for instance, assures us that most world leaders (Illuminati) "only appear to be in conflict for the purposes of deluding the people into a false reality" (Icke 477).

Yet indisputable evidence of elite factionalism -- of the upper echelons of the food chain chasing different agendas than world government -- has long been apparent. In his magnum opus, *Tragedy and Hope* (1966), for example, Carroll Quigley had observed how, since the 1950s, Wall Street had been challenged by the "new wealth springing up outside the eastern cities, notably in the Southwest and Far West." As early as 1964, the representatives of this "new wealth," based in oil, aviation or armaments, had engaged in a financial struggle with the "old wealth" of the East for control of the political process -- and ultimately of the White House -- to ensure that high government spending on military and space continued (Quigley 1245-1246). This split between the so-called East Coast "Yankees" and the "Cowboys" of the Southwest was subsequently explored at length by Kirkpatrick Sale (1975) and Carl Oglesby (1977).

Seen through the prism of elite factionalism, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is a valuable addition to this neglected field. It highlights in some detail the workings and influence of yet another private grouping that subverts democratic processes in service of a narrow agenda. Of course, some caution is necessary as the outcry over its activities is driven by elite, rather than popular, angst at losing the initiative. But to disregard it, either out of fears of being labeled as anti-Semitic or because it conflicts with pet theories, would be shortsighted.

©2006 Will Banyan. This article appeared in *PARANOIA* issue 44, Spring 2007. Will Banyan has a graduate degree in Information Science and is a writer specializing in the political economy of globalization. He has worked for local and national governments, international organizations and the private sector. He is currently working on a revisionist history of the New World Order and an analysis of the War on Terror. Banyan's six-part series, "Rockefeller Internationalism" and four-part series "A Short History of the Round Table" were published in *Nexus*. His article "Outflanking the Nation-State" appears on the *Paranoia* website, and research papers "The Invisible Man of the New World Order: Raymond B. Fosdick" and "The Proud Internationalist: The Globalist Vision of David Rockefeller"

appear at: www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/third_section.html. He may be reached at banyan007@rediffmail.com.

The Israel Lobby paper may be read at the London Review of Books website (www.lrb.co.uk). See also video (and transcript) of the Sept 2006 debate at Cooper Union in NYC, "The Israel Lobby: Does it Have Too Much Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy?" (www.scribemedia.org/2006/10/11/israel-lobby/)

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