



The New R E P U B L I C



SURVEYING THE ISRAEL LOBBY.

Oil and Vinegar

by Martin Peretz

"The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," a "faculty research working paper" recently produced for Harvard's John F. Kennedy (trade) School of Government by Stephen Walt, its academic dean, and John Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, weighs in at nearly 35,000 words. The word "oil," however, appears in the document exactly seven times--all of them generic or trivial. None of the references relate to the systemic U.S. dependence on foreign crude or, more to the point, to the truly powerful lobby that has worked for many decades to satisfy it through arranging that the producer governments get what they want: mainly protection against radical Muslims or Muslim radicals and against fuel-efficient cars. Israel's friends--foreign affairs idealists and realists, rightists, leftists, centrists, Christians, Jews, nonbelievers--know the power of this oil lobby, with which they have tangled to ensure that the United States supports an ally against its many unworthy enemies.

Support for Israel is, deep down, an expression of America's best view of itself. Mearsheimer and Walt clearly have no clue that U.S. support for the Jewish restoration, rather than a result of Zionist machinations, dates back to the Puritans. And it carries through Woodrow Wilson and Harry Truman to, if you'll forgive me, George W. Bush. But rarely without colossal struggle. Indeed, how could the authors forget Truman's certified nutcase secretary of defense, James Forrestal, who held paranoid views of Zionist perfidy congruent with their own and could only relieve himself of them by jumping from a sixteenth-story window at the Bethesda Naval Hospital? (In a *TNR* article at the time, Harold Ickes wrote that Forrestal was a satisfied reader of this magazine!) As that incident shows, Israel's opponents were overruled during the Truman administration. But they were not when James Baker was the steward of U.S. foreign policy under Bush *père*. The truth is that the Clinton-era peace processors (Martin Indyk, Dennis Ross, Aaron David Miller), whom Walt and Mearsheimer blithely and falsely associate with the Lobby, were either leftovers from the Baker team or held a stubborn view of how to force peace: Squeeze Israel. Time and again, they imperiled Israel in order to get Yasir Arafat to accede to, in De Gaulle's phrase, the "peace of the brave."

This paper is not research in any serious sense, although its academic paraphernalia--211 scholia, most with more than one reference--are intended to lend it an undeserved seriousness. But the apparatus deployed in this tendentious work is the labor of obsessives with dark and conspiratorial minds. Have you ever received a letter from a crackpot in which every stray fact fits together in a coherent whole? Sometimes the academy produces genuine theories-of-everything, such as those of Spengler and Sorel,

Sorokin and B.F. Skinner, men of immense learning. Ingenuous and suggestive, yes. Still, even these serious men were touched by maniacal fantasies.

Mearsheimer and Walt, despite their standing as exemplars of the realist school of international politics, know ironically little about reality. They are abstractionists, constructing imaginary solutions to real conflict. Mearsheimer, for instance, has argued that nuclear proliferation is the best guarantee of peace. Germany should have the bomb--also Japan and Ukraine. This, he maintains, is not simply manageable, but preferable. What's so dangerous if Iraq and Iran have it, too?

To be sure, there is a pro-Israel lobby--or, to be precise, many pro-Israel lobbies (some of them favoring what others oppose)--and it wields some influence. But this is not at all the devious, capital-L "Lobby" that Mearsheimer and Walt claim. After all, the Lobby includes everyone from Jerry Falwell to New York Representative Eliot Engel to, well, me. Thank God I was not left out, as I was from Richard Nixon's enemies list.

I don't recall whether I've written urging the administration to go after Syria. If I haven't, it was in defiance of the Lobby, for, as Mearsheimer and Walt argue, the U.S. confrontation of Damascus was a huge achievement of the Jews. This is preposterous. The White House barely acknowledged Syria until two circumstances came together. The first was that French President Jacques Chirac, eager to return France to some prominence in Beirut and offended that Bashar Assad's security services had murdered his client, Rafik Hariri, prodded Washington to dislodge the ophthalmologist's forces from Lebanon. The second was that our commanders in Iraq saw the Syrians encouraging foreign terrorists to spill Shia blood and wreak havoc in Baghdad. And so Assad's vicious gendarmerie was expelled from Lebanon.

The authors also debit the Iraq war to the Jews. Douglas Feith and Scooter Libby and Paul Wolfowitz (who, by the way, has many stated qualms with our Israel policy) apparently seduced pillars of the Protestant establishment--Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and Bush--into attacking Saddam Hussein. They did all this on behalf of the Lobby--the same Lobby that is now seducing the country into a military confrontation with Iran. Of course, Israel can take care of itself vis-à-vis Tehran, thank you very much. In fact, it is Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait that are truly endangered by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's mad Shia regime. Indeed, our own supply of oil is in danger--as is the whole effort to keep nukes out of the control of mad states, mad movements, mad men.

Mearsheimer and Walt assert, "Readers may reject our conclusions, of course, but the evidence on which they rest is not controversial." But, to take but one example, look at the evidence for their proposition that "Israel's presence in Jerusalem and the plight of the Palestinians" are the chief motivations of terrorists like those in Al Qaeda. (Never mind that Osama bin Laden doesn't speak much of this, and then only as an afterthought to the Islamic reconquest of Andalusia.) The first person they cite is "Middle East expert Shibley Telhami," who said, "No other issue resonates with the public in the Arab world, and many other parts of the Muslim world, more deeply than Palestine. No other issue

shapes the regional perceptions of America more fundamentally than the issue of Palestine." Forgive me, but this is a pathetic citation. Telhami is a simpleminded person--good for a CNN sound bite, but no more--and so he has a simple explanation for Arab hatreds. But where does he hang his hat? At the very Saban Center for Middle East Studies that Mearsheimer and Walt characterize as one of the Lobby's intellectual headquarters. Apparently, the Jews work in mysterious ways.

For further evidence, the authors turn to Hosni Mubarak, who has also claimed it is Washington's Israel policy that spurs anti-American sentiment in the Arab world. It would be too much for Mubarak to fault his own regime, but perhaps it is our support for that despotic and debased government that makes Egyptians hate us. Mearsheimer and Walt's third authoritative mustering is to Lakhdar Brahimi, a *tiers-mondiste* Algerian who was a functionary of the League of Arab States and onetime U.N. special envoy to Iraq. He is quoted asserting that Israeli policy toward the Palestinians is "the great poison in the region" and that "in the region, and beyond," people recognize the "injustice of this policy and the equally unjust support of the United States for this policy." Even Kofi Annan could not countenance such stupidity, and he chastised Brahimi for it.

This is nonsense scholarship. "It is really the stuff," Fouad Ajami told me this week, "of easy chatter in the coffeehouses of Ramallah and Nablus, Cairo and Amman. The lurid fantasies endemic to the Arab world have been given a false but sustaining authority with the imprimatur of two great universities, Harvard in particular. The conspiracy of the Jews and their American friends against the Palestinians, and against Arabs generally, has now been demonstrated by two eminent professors. Intrigue and plot have been certified as the real engines of history."

Jeffrey Frieden, Harvard's Stanfield Professor of International Peace (given his title, I can't imagine what he actually teaches), acknowledges that many on the faculty were "very surprised by the vitriolic response provoked by the paper in the American public." Well, at least this academic recognizes that the demos actually supports Israel, even if the professoriate doesn't. Still, Frieden himself finds the "paper's central premise ... not controversial." The professor is wrong. The "working paper" aims to prove that there is a largely Jewish pro-Israel conspiracy triumphant against U.S. democracy and U.S. interests. But the body politic itself is Israel's ally--and the body politic determines what U.S. interests are.

Professor Walt is vacating his position as academic dean of the Kennedy School in June. Even though he decided to leave the job of his own volition some time ago, Harvard should be grateful for his departure from this seat. An academic dean is supposed to be the shepherd of his faculty's (and his students') respect for evidence and scholarship. Having traduced the rules of evidence and the spirit of scholarly inquiry, he can no longer perform this function. Regrettably, Walt will not likely suffer any crueller fate than this. He has tenure, and tenure insulates one from all kinds of infractions against truth and honor.

Produced by StandWithUs