

Jews and the Presidency, abroad: the Republicans and Israel

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Contents:

- Tevi Troy, "How the GOP Went Zionist" from Commentary, December 2015
- Excerpt from Dennis Ross, Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama, October 2015

Commentary

DECEMBER 2015 ISRAEL

How the GOP Went Zionist

Republicans are now among the Jewish state's most important friends. This was not always so.

by **Tevi Troy**

The movement to isolate Israel may be in full swing on college campuses across the country, and Israel may be the subject of ever-louder international denunciations, but when it comes to a Republican Party riven by squabbles, the Jewish state has become a unifying glue. Support for Israel is all but unanimous among the party's politicians in Washington, and in the presidential race, candidates vie to outdo one another when it comes to expressing their commitment to it; even the isolationist presidential candidate Rand Paul has gone to great pains to attempt to establish his pro-Israel bona fides.

It was not ever thus. Indeed, the emergence of the GOP as the nation's pro-Israel voice is an odd and fascinating element in the modern political history of the United States. For the first 45 years of Israel's existence, the Republican Party was deeply divided when it came to the Middle East. Powerful forces inside the GOP had long been at best uncomfortable with Israel and at worst openly hostile. Those forces included big businessmen and oilmen with deep connections and interests in Arab lands and so-called foreign-policy realists who did not see why the U.S. should maintain a special relationship with a tiny, economically negligible country surrounded by 22 Arab nations that wished it would disappear.

Old-line country-club anti-Semites played their part, as did a certain camp among America's anti-Communists, for whom Israel was suspect in large measure because it called itself socialist and because Marx and Trotsky had both been Jews.

As a practical political matter, there were few discernible electoral incentives for the GOP to support Israel, given that the Jewish community was so completely in the Democratic camp (save for many progressive Jews in the Northeast, such as Senator Jacob Javits of New York, who were members of the Republican Party because they loathed the role Southern segregationists played in the Democratic electoral coalition).



Richard Nixon served as Eisenhower's vice president and shared Ike's views on maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East. When he became president in 1969, he wanted his administration to serve as a corrective to what Nixon believed had been the Johnson administration's tilt toward Israel. Nixon also had a fraught personal relationship with Jewry and Judaism.

The first Republican to serve as president after Israel's founding was Dwight David Eisenhower, elected in 1952. Eisenhower was put off by Israel's democratic-socialist ideology. Additionally, its tiny size, martial weakness, and lack of strategic resources of any kind marked it as an irritant. Eisenhower believed that his predecessor, Harry Truman, had only supported the creation of the state because of political considerations—the 1948 Jewish vote—not strategic calculations. His view was that the United States needed to preserve friendly relations with Arab states to maintain access to oil reserves and to keep the Arabs from forging stronger ties with the Soviet Union, which had begun to advocate for the Arab world against Israel in international forums such as the United Nations during Eisenhower's first term. When Israel, France, and Britain invaded the Sinai to reestablish Western control of the Suez Canal after its seizure by Egypt, Eisenhower reacted with rage and forced the coalition to withdraw.

The nascent conservative movement had a similar perspective on Israel. In 1957, an unsigned *National Review* editorial noted the importance of “reaching a friendly understanding with the surrounding Arab world” and warned against

“sacrificing America’s primary strategic interests to Zionist pressures at home.” The magazine insisted that Arabs “must be fully compensated for the economic and social consequences of the Jewish conquest of Palestine.” There was one hint of changes to come, where the editorial went on to say that “the Israeli government, to be sure, deserves to be congratulated on its hardheaded firmness in staring down the busybodies of the UN.” This was an early planting of a seed that would help to grow a new GOP foreign policy—one that would emerge both from the evolution of the party’s intellectuals and from its grassroots. But the seed would take decades to cultivate, as the party’s standard-bearers continued on in the Eisenhower vein.

One of those standard-bearers was Richard Nixon. He had served as Ike’s vice president and shared Eisenhower’s views on maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East. When he became president in 1969, he wanted his administration to serve as a corrective to what Nixon believed had been the Johnson administration’s tilt toward Israel. Nixon also had a fraught personal relationship with Jewry and Judaism. On the one hand, he was the first president to appoint a Jewish national-security adviser, Henry Kissinger, who would also become the first Jewish secretary of state. But the private Nixon spoke freely in bigoted terms about Jews and enjoyed poking at Kissinger’s origins. Once, when Kissinger expressed his opinion on an issue related to the Middle East at a National Security Council meeting, Nixon called him out by asking, “Now can we get an American point of view?” In his memoir *White House Years*, Kissinger recounts how Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir called Nixon “an old friend of the Jewish people” and then notes wryly that this “was startling news to those of us familiar with Nixon’s ambivalences on that score.”

And yet, when Israel faced an existential crisis during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Nixon showed little ambivalence. He saved the Jewish state from a devastating defeat at the hands of the Egyptians, armed to the teeth with Soviet weaponry. Operation Nickel Grass provided Israel with more than 112,000 tons of supplies. Nixon knew he would be criticized over the airlift, and this understanding helped

steel his resolve: “We are going to get blamed just as much for three planes as for three hundred.” When the airlift wasn’t moving fast enough, he ordered his generals to “use every [plane] we have—everything that will fly.”

Nixon’s decision to arm Israel in the 1973 war would have long-standing repercussions. One consequence was the oil embargo initiated by the Arab states in 1973, an economically devastating move—and one that convinced ordinary Americans who had to cope with the tripling of energy costs that the Arab states were hostile entities that deserved to be confronted rather than appeased, as the foreign-policy panjandrums of both parties had long asserted. Decades of American evenhandedness had failed to stay OPEC’s intimidation. Perhaps a different approach might prove more valid in the future.

The war further clarified for the American people where the various Middle East players stood when it came to the Cold War. The Soviet Union had made it unmistakably evident that it was Israel’s enemy just as it was the enemy of the United States. And the war marked a turning point in Israel’s relation with the United States at a strategic level as well. Israel not only proved proficient at destroying Soviet weaponry used against it by Egypt and Syria, it also shared captured Soviet weapons, including the T-62 battle tank, with the United States. This was an intelligence coup for the U.S. military, and it demonstrated that oil was not the only strategic asset available to the United States in the Middle East. Israel, too, was an asset.

Around this time, there was an emerging realization among some key foreign-policy thinkers that a coalition of Third World nations and Soviet allies was treating the U.S. as a punching bag at the United Nations. This was given full voice in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s seminal 1975 Commentary essay, “The United States in Opposition.” Moynihan’s response to the rhetorical onslaught against the United States was simple: America should fight back. The essay led to his appointment by President Gerald Ford as U.S. ambassador to the UN in 1975 and 1976. And the most notable moment of Moynihan’s tenure came when he joined with Israel against the UN’s Orwellian declaration of Zionism as racism.

Taking tough stands against Third World and Soviet critiques of the West put Israel and the United States on the same side and helped shake the longstanding view that America's strategic interests required taking the Arab view of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ironically, Moynihan's actions would have their most lasting impact not on his own Democratic Party but on the GOP. As my brother Gil Troy put it in his history of Moynihan's fight against the anti-Zionism resolution, "Moynihan's stand against Soviet and Third World bullying in the United Nations helped inspire [Ronald] Reagan's more aggressive approach there" in the 1980s.

The same would prove true about the influence of another hawkish Democrat, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson. Many of his aides—including Elliott Abrams, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and Paul Wolfowitz—shared his perspective, and it was in Jackson's offices that the emerging "neoconservative" foreign policy was first laid out in Washington. Israel was not Jackson's primary foreign-policy interest. Rather, his top priority was a strong U.S. stance against Soviet aggression. And because he believed the Nixon-Kissinger policy of détente was a capitulation, he pressed for increased involvement of Congress in international relations to counter the administration's appeasement; his greatest success came with the passage of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which linked U.S.-Soviet trade to Soviet human-rights policy, particularly as regarded oppressed Soviet Jews who wished to emigrate.

Jackson-Vanik was a landmark because it heralded a new era in which Congress would take a more active hand in the making and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. The rise of congressional independence in foreign policy meant that an individual member's views on these matters became more relevant, tactically and strategically, and on Israel in particular.

Pro-Israel lobbying groups such as AIPAC began focusing more effort on lobbying Congress, too. Lobbying is not just about applying pressure and raising money; successful lobbyists attempt to make the case to those to whom they appeal that the vote is right and just and will benefit them, their districts, and the country in general. AIPAC's new focus on Capitol Hill was in part educational. Trips to Israel

for members and their staffs became routine. The effort was extraordinarily successful. Aid to Israel became regularized. That began with the signing of the Camp David accords when the United States began to supply Israel with money it had lost from giving back the Sinai oil fields Israel had captured in the Six-Day War. Later, in 1985, U.S. military aid to Israel was converted from loans to grants; and an earmark for purchasing military equipment became part of the annual foreign-aid appropriation shortly afterward.

Outside of Washington, another important trend emerged in the 1970s that would have a far-reaching impact on the GOP's realignment with Israel: the rise of the evangelical vote. Staunch evangelical support for Israel meant that it was no longer mainly Jewish voters who cared where politicians stood. As these voters moved in large numbers to the Republican Party, beginning with the election in 1980, these pro-Israel Christians started to emerge as the largest and most important segment of the GOP base. Republican politicians started to take notice.

Then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin also took notice, and took steps to encourage the burgeoning evangelical support of Israel. In 1981, Begin spoke to a gathering of 3,000 evangelical Christians in Jerusalem and issued a medal to Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell. After Israel bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, Begin even called Falwell to explain Israel's reasoning.

Begin stood in stark contrast to American Jewish leaders, such as Rabbi Alexander Schindler of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, who told the *New York Times* in 1981 that he thought it "madness and suicide if Jews honor for their support of Israel right-wing evangelists who constitute a danger to the Jews of the United States." Begin was also willing to work on less enlightened evangelicals such as Bailey Smith. After Smith notoriously said that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew," Begin met with him in Israel and helped turn him around, politically if not theologically. When asked about his work with evangelicals like Smith and Falwell, Begin aide Yehuda Avner said: "Israel will not

turn aside a hand stretched out by a friend in support of Israel's just cause. Jerry Falwell is one of the most vigorous and outspoken friends of Israel. We will not turn aside that hand of friendship.”

It was not only conservative clergy who would be converted to the pro-Israel cause, but conservative legislators as well. The most important example was the evolution of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms. Helms was openly hostile to Israel for his first decade or so in the Senate, and was targeted for defeat by Jewish groups in a 1984 Senate reelection bid that he survived only by the skin of his teeth. The next year, AIPAC helped arrange a trip to Israel for Helms and his wife; Helms himself indicated that the trip was life-changing (though surely his near-death experience with voters had had a clarifying effect as well). Helms would go on to chair from 1995 to 2001 the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, where he would actively legislate on Israel's behalf.

Helms's shift represented the confluence of forces that were remaking the Republican Party. The growing evangelical support for Israel had its greatest impact in the South, fast becoming the GOP's stronghold. And it coincided with Ronald Reagan's eloquence in support of the Jewish state. Reagan did not see eye to eye with the Israelis on every issue; he approved the sale of AWACS radar planes to Saudi Arabia in 1981, criticized the Osirak attack, and was not supportive of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. But Reagan spoke and thought of Israel in a manner new to American presidents. He saw that Israel was a strategic asset to the United States in the struggle against totalitarianism. Reagan recognized the alignment not only of interests but foundational Judeo-Christian beliefs: “Israel represents the one stable democracy sharing values with us in that part of the world,” he said.

He took the historic step of formalizing military cooperation between the United States and Israel. This strategic redefinition of the relationship had a number of salutary long-term implications for both nations. First, it helped improve the Israeli military by giving Israel access to U.S. technology, training, and tactics. Linking the American and the Israeli militaries established a connection between

the two nations that went beyond the political vagaries of elections. The Pentagon also began to recognize the strategic importance of maintaining its joint activities with Israel, which could field-test U.S. weapons, strengthen intelligence cooperation, and serve as a base for U.S. equipment in a hostile region.

Reagan's perspective was plain: Reward your friends and punish your enemies. Stand up to the USSR, hijackers, and petro-blackmailers, and stand with people who were on your side. In this context, it made perfect sense for Republicans to back Israel, even if you belonged to a country club, worked for an oil company, or were an armchair strategist who understood the magnitude by which Arabs outnumbered Israel in population.



Congressional GOP support for Israel became even more marked in the 1990s after the GOP took over both Houses of Congress. The outspokenly pro-Israel Speaker Newt Gingrich set up a contrast on the Israel issue between himself and the Clinton administration, which was pressing Israel for territorial concessions in the name of peace deals.

Following Reagan's lead and influenced by the neoconservatives who had gravitated to the GOP, pro-Israel voices became more confident in expressing their view of the ties that bound the United States and the Jewish state—the same monotheistic roots, which disposed them to an appreciation for human dignity and self-determination, and a shared belief in a covenantal founding of both nations. This view helped the GOP establish an ideological framework for foreign policy beyond the binary question of Communist versus anti-Communist.

None of this was seamless. Reagan was succeeded by George H.W. Bush, himself quite literally a Country Club Republican and oilman by birth and occupation and a foreign-policy realist by disposition. He famously complained about the Israel lobby, saying ludicrously that he, the president, was “one lonely guy” up against “some powerful political forces” made up of “a thousand lobbyists on the Hill.” His secretary of state, James Baker, was even worse, earning the wrong kind of immortality with his line, “F— the Jews, they don't vote for us anyway.” Even as

these attacks were going on, there were signs that Bush had already become an anachronism in a rapidly changing world—most notably the fact that the Baker line was leaked to the press by his disgusted fellow cabinet secretary Jack Kemp, a key figure in remaking the party as pro-Israel.

But Bush's brand of hostility was not the only anti-Israel tendency within the rapidly evolving American right. Open anti-Semitism reared its head as well, in the personages of the writers Patrick J. Buchanan (a protest candidate for president in 1992 and 1996) and Joseph Sobran. When Buchanan called Congress "Israeli-occupied territory," he was not only giving foul voice to a classic anti-Semitic theme but was accurately reflecting the fact that by this point, anti-Israel sentiment on Capitol Hill had become a mark of extremism in both parties. More important, both Sobran and Buchanan received a very public cold shoulder from the mainstream conservative movement. William F. Buckley Jr. himself wrote a long indictment of his friend Sobran in *National Review* and consigned his and Buchanan's brand of Jew-hatred to the margins of the conservative movement.

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Netanyahu would go on to play a key part in facilitating better relations between Israel and the GOP in another way as well. As prime minister in the 1990s and, more successfully, as finance minister from 2003 to 2005, Netanyahu embarked on a series of economic reforms that liberalized Israel's previously socialistic and stagnant economy. Netanyahu made alterations in Israel's welfare system, slashed government spending, privatized parts of the economy, and cut taxes.

Unemployment and deficits went down, economic growth surged, and Israel developed its reputation as the high tech start-up nation. The reforms also opened the door to more support from the Republicans, as backing the Jewish state no longer meant having to apologize for propping up a socialist economy. Instead, Republicans could now tout a free-market Israeli economy, which was far more congruent with prevailing GOP economic theory.

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hen the GOP took over the White House after Bill Clinton, the days of strategic ambiguity by GOP presidents toward Israel were long gone. George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush may have come from the same family, but they came from different Republican parties. The party that embraced the younger Bush was evangelically dominated, congressionally focused, and definitively pro-Israel. As Bush once told a Jewish leader: “The Saudis thought ‘this Texas oil guy was going to go against Israel’ and I told them you have the wrong guy.”

As the story goes, when Bush went to Israel, then-Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon went out of his way to welcome the visiting governor, and Arafat gave Bush the runaround—after which he denounced Bush for refusing to meet with him. Sharon’s foresight would be rewarded, and Arafat’s shortsightedness would come back to haunt him. This became obvious during the Second Intifada, with Israel suffering from a barrage of Arafat-encouraged suicide attacks. At the time, America itself was recovering from the shock of 9/11, and the televised footage of Palestinians celebrating the attacks by handing out candy clarified issues in the minds of many Americans.

Bush gave Sharon the leeway he needed to defend Israeli lives. Former White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer tells an instructive story in this regard. Following one Palestinian attack, Fleischer handed Bush what he called “typical” talking points that called for “both sides to refrain from violence.” Bush looked at the talking points and responded, “No, don’t say that. Just say this: ‘Israel has a

right to defend itself.’” According to Fleischer, Bush’s preferred response “sent shock waves through the bureaucracy,” which was used to deliberately evasive, morally nebulous suggestions of “even-handedness.”

In Bush’s view, and as a result of a generational shift in the GOP, Israel was our ally and was going to be treated as such. To be sure, Bush continued to push for the so-called peace process, especially in his second term. But Bush’s effort, led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, featured none of the vitriol that would characterize the Obama administration’s push for a negotiated settlement.

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hus, the tale of the transformation of the GOP into an unambiguously, proudly, and solidly pro-Israel coalition, 80 percent of whose self-identified members now tell pollsters they support the Jewish state. In 2014, Joshua Muravchik wrote an important book, *Making David into Goliath*, an account of how Israel went from being a widely admired nation in 1967 to one of the most reviled. In Muravchik’s telling, this development was not accidental, but the result of strategic action by a number of actors—on the left, in the Arab world, and in Europe—to delegitimize and damage Israel. But while the Jewish state lost many allies during this period, it also gained an important and reliable friend. At the same time that the world was learning to hate Israel, the Republican Party was learning to love it.

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THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL

Today, the relationship between the United States and Israel is extolled by American presidents. We take it for granted that presidents will stress their commitment to Israel and to the ties that bind us. But it was not always this way. Harry Truman faced enormous resistance within his administration to his decision to recognize the Jewish state. Similarly, selling or providing arms to Israel was taboo until President Kennedy decided to do so—again, a controversial decision within his national security apparatus. Later, during the first week of the 1973 war, Richard Nixon initially resisted Israeli near-desperate pleas to resupply weaponry, following the major losses of aircraft and tanks the Israelis had suffered. Although Nixon eventually provided a massive resupply of arms to Israel, his decision had more to do with cold war concerns that Soviet weapons could not be seen to defeat American weapons than with any special relationship that existed between our two countries.

From the perspective of history, the relationship has clearly evolved. And to understand where the relationship is today and where it is going, particularly during a period of transition in the Middle East, it is important to understand why the relationship changed. To do so, I will examine the policy and approach of every administration since Israel's birth. I will offer a narrative of the policy and the key developments in each administration,

starting with Harry Truman's. I will outline each president's basic instincts or mind-set toward Israel and toward our policy in the region, as well as the basic assumptions that seemed to guide the national security establishment and senior officials about Israel and the region—and whether there was unanimity or division.

What will emerge from the review is remarkable continuity—not of policy, necessarily, but of arguments. Over and over again, we will see recycled concerns that too close a relationship with Israel will harm our ties to the Arabs and damage our position in the region. Until the 1990s, the fear was that we would drive the Arabs into a Soviet embrace. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the concern was that it would damage our relationship with the Arabs and make us targets of jihadist terrorism. The debates that center on these issues produced a pattern: when an administration is judged by its successors to be too close to Israel, we distance ourselves from the Jewish state. Eisenhower believed that Truman was too supportive of Israel, so he felt an imperative to demonstrate that we were not partial to Israel, that we were in fact willing to seek closer ties to our real friends in the region—the Arabs. President Nixon, likewise, felt that Lyndon Johnson was too pro-Israel. In his first two years, he, too, distanced us from Israel and showed sensitivity to Arab concerns. President George H. W. Bush believed his former boss, Ronald Reagan, suffered from the same impulse of being too close to Israel. He, too, saw virtue in fostering distance. And President Obama, at the outset of his administration, certainly saw George W. Bush as having cost us in the Arab and Muslim world at least in part because he was unwilling to allow any gap to emerge between the United States and Israel.

In none of these instances do we actually gain any benefit to our position in the region. Our influence does not increase; our ties with the conservative Arab monarchies do not materially improve. Neither is there any decline in those relationships during administrations that are putatively seen as being closer to Israel. Our ties with the more radical Arab regimes are not good, but then again—with the possible exceptions of the Kennedy administration's concerted effort to reach out to Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Reagan administration's support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War—they were never good.¹

Yet arguments that we must distance ourselves from Israel are not discredited when the predicted positive outcomes do not occur. Nor are these arguments discredited when the anticipated terrible consequences of drawing closer to Israel fail to materialize. With regard to the latter, when we

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recognized Israel in 1948, or later when we sold arms to Israel and the Soviets couldn't replace us in the area, and when the flow of oil from the region was not lost, no one questioned why these devastating outcomes did not happen. No one asked what was wrong in our assumptions about the dynamics of the Middle East. Remarkably, there seem to be few lessons ever learned.

These assumptions are obviously about more than Israel's place in the region and its neighbors' reactions to it. They also involve the perceived forces of change and whether and how we should relate to them. Late in the Eisenhower administration, the president signed a policy directive that effectively called for us to "accommodate" radical Arab nationalism. The assumptions that guided that posture are similar to the arguments in parts of the Obama administration in 2011 and 2012 that argued that the Muslim Brotherhood represented the wave of the future in the region and that our more conservative Arab friends were on the wrong side of history—and our policy needed to reflect that. In the late 1950s and in John Kennedy's first two years in office, the logic of that policy was pursued and failed to deliver. Yet no one asked how or even whether the radical Arab nationalists like President Nasser of Egypt could alter their aims without betraying their very identity. The same may be true today with Islamists. It makes sense to take a hard look at these kinds of assumptions and evaluate them in light of what drove the radical nationalists in the past and what factors may drive the Islamists today.

If there was ever a time to rethink assumptions and gain a better handle on the dynamics that are likely to shape the Middle East, this is surely it. Because the American approach to Israel over time was generally derivative of our broad approach to the region, one way to rethink assumptions is to see which ones took hold, why they endured, where they were off base, and how they need to be changed. That is why I examine every administration from Harry Truman to Barack Obama and how each approached both Israel and the region.

Harry S. Truman: The Struggle to Adopt a Policy

"Struggle" is the right word to describe the policy of the Truman administration toward Palestine and the emergence of the Jewish state of Israel. President Truman had to contend with the reality that none of his senior national security officials saw any strategic benefit in supporting Jewish