

Jews and the Presidency, at home

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ARTS & LETTERS

The Love Affair Between American Presidents and Jewish Artists, and Why It May Be Over

The historical relationship—and the proximity to power it afforded—enabled wider acceptance of Jews in America

BY TEVI TROY

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In the spring of 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave President Barack Obama a copy of the *Book of Esther*. Not long afterwards, the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg gave Obama *The New American Hagadah*, a collaboration

between the writers Nathan Englander and Jonathan Safran Foer. Peter Beinart then brought not one, but two copies of his get-tough-on-Israel book, *The Crisis of Zionism*, to a meeting with Obama. Obama responded by telling Beinart, who had been severely criticized within the Jewish community for the book, to “hang in there.” None of these literary encounters between Jewish authors and an American president seems surprising because such meetings have become so common. Over the last 50 years, so many Jewish artists—under both Republican and Democratic administrations—have received the Presidential Medal of Freedom that it has become a regular and not even particularly noteworthy event. Starting with President Kennedy’s 1963 configuration of this, the nation’s highest civilian award, in its current incarnation, a host of Jewish artists have won it, including Bob Dylan (2012), Elie Wiesel(1992), Irving Berlin (1977), Kirk Douglas (1981), Aaron Copland (1964), Vladimir Horowitz (1986), Arthur Rubinstein (1976), and Isaac Stern (1992).

Yet the association of American presidents and Jewish artists was not always a natural one—and American presidents played a significant role in making it happen, helping to propel Jews into the mainstream of American life. Although John Quincy Adams began working on, but eventually did not pursue, writing a history of the Jewish people, the first president to interact with an American Jewish author appears to have been James Monroe. In 1817, during a visit to Charleston, Monroe attended a play written by the Jewish playwright Isaac Harby titled *Alberti*, whose Romeo and Juliet-esque plot about cousins in love in 15th-century Florence is almost certainly the first fictional work by an American Jewish author that a U.S. president read or saw.

Harby was not unknown to Monroe. Three years earlier, Harby had written a letter to then Secretary of State Monroe complaining about the firing of U.S. consul to Tunis Mordecai Manuel Noah: Harby had been concerned, not without reason, that Noah was fired because he was a Jew. Some historians have even interpreted Monroe's attendance as a gesture of contrition by the president. Regardless of the political backstory, Monroe's appearance was an important validation of the work of an American Jewish artist by an American president, and it took place at a time when Jewish artists were not nearly as common in the United States as they are today.

The first truly meaningful interaction between a president and an American Jewish-authored work of art came a century later, when Theodore Roosevelt inspired a play by the British-born Jew Israel Zangwill. Roosevelt had met Zangwill in 1898, when Roosevelt was governor-elect of New York State. The two men met again in 1904, when Zangwill visited Roosevelt at the White House, and they discussed the question of the assimilation of ethnic groups in America. The playwright paid careful attention to what Roosevelt was saying about assimilation, both in the meeting and from the presidential bully pulpit. In 1905, Zangwill had a revelation, seeing before him "in one vivid flash" the whole of a play about assimilation in America, making the case for intermarriage as the solution to ethnic tensions and long-standing hatreds.

Zangwill called the play *The Melting Pot*, and he dedicated it to Roosevelt. The dedication was deserved, as Roosevelt's ideas helped Zangwill develop his concept. Zangwill invited Roosevelt to come to the opening of the play in Washington on Oct.

5, 1908. Roosevelt's retinue that night included Secretary of Commerce Oscar Straus, whom Roosevelt had named as the first Jewish Cabinet secretary in U.S. history. When the play ended and Zangwill stepped on stage, Roosevelt shouted out "It's a great play, Mr. Zangwill; it's a great play!"—a line that Zangwill would eagerly use in promoting the play for years to come. While presidential validation of Jewish artists undoubtedly played an important role in fostering American acceptance of Jews, Roosevelt himself benefited from the interaction by having his vision for assimilation of immigrants to the United States amplified by a popular play.

Woodrow Wilson, who did not particularly love Jews, loved theater even more than Teddy Roosevelt and saw an astounding 225 plays while in office. His favorite genre was vaudeville, which gave him ample opportunity to see many Jewish performers. Some of the genre's top stars were Jewish, including Fannie Brice, Eddie Cantor, Molly Picon, and Al Jolson. In 1915, Wilson was having breakfast in the White House when Jolson came by. Jolson, who had been invited to the White House by the theater-loving Wilson, went right up to the president and said, "I'm Al Jolson, and I want to see the president." Wilson responded, "I am the president," and added that he had not yet seen Jolson perform. Jolson, seeing this as his cue, said "Wait a minute—you ain't heard nothin' yet." He then belted out the song "You Made Me Love You" for the entire room.

This story demonstrates an astonishing level of comfort for a Jewish entertainer in front of a head of state. Given the levels of anti-Semitism prevalent in the world at that time, it is impossible to imagine a Jewish performer engaging in a similar

performance before a head of state anywhere else, certainly not the kaiser, the tsar, or the queen of England.

In the period after WWII, Jewish writers became such fixtures of American letters that presidents reading their work had become *de rigueur*. (Even George H.W. Bush spoke admiringly of J.D. Salinger; believing that Bush claimed to have read *Catching in the Rye* in school, Garry Wills mocked the former president, since the book came out after he was already an adult; but at least Salinger's father was Jewish.) John F. Kennedy showed particular remarkable levels of comfort with intellectuals of Jewish descent, and it is fair to say the popular myth if not the political reality of Camelot was largely a Jewish literary creation. Ted Sorenson (half-Jewish) almost certainly ghost-wrote Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*, and Arthur Schlesinger (of Jewish descent) served as his White House intellectual. After Kennedy's death, the Jewish writer Theodore White helped promote the Camelot myth following an interview he conducted with Mrs. Kennedy. And the admiration went in both directions. Norman Podhoretz, a liberal at the time, wrote in his first memoir, *Making It*, that thanks to the Kennedy Administration, "from having carried a faint aura of disreputability, the title 'intellectual' all at once became an honorific."

Even Richard Nixon, of the enemies list and the anti-Semitic tirades, surrounded himself with Jewish thinkers and aides—including Henry Kissinger, William Safire, Len Garment, and Herb Stein. Safire even recalled that in 1968, when Safire told Nixon that he would not be working the next day because of Yom Kippur. Nixon said, "You go all the way—the cap, the shawl, and everything? Good for you!"

By the 1980s, a Jewish artist even felt comfortable enough to upbraid a president in the White House. In 1984, Ronald Reagan had promised German Chancellor Helmut Kohl that he would visit Bitburg Cemetery, which included the graves of 49 SS storm troopers. When the trip was announced in April of 1985, Reagan was roundly denounced, and most loudly in the Jewish community. On April 19, the iconic Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel criticized the president in person and in public while receiving the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement, saying, famously, “That place, Mr. President, is not your place.” (To be fair, in addition to Wiesel, Reagan also had some far more supportive Jewish writers, including the economist Milton Friedman, whom Reagan loved to cite.)

In our own day, presidential comfort with Jewish entertainers, and even entertainers in general, is so high that the presidents perennially appear at the White House Correspondents Association dinner where, according to First Lady Laura Bush, “the president sits and listens while comedians and members of the press crack barbed jokes about him.” In 2011, the Jewish comic Seth Meyers said to sitting President Obama “Mr. President, look at your hair. If your hair gets any whiter the Tea Party is going to endorse it.” Similarly, as the Jewish book-giving to Obama suggests, Jewish writers are now so ubiquitous that sometimes they don’t even care about the presidential imprimatur, at least if the president in question does not share their politics. When George W. Bush was reported to have read and enjoyed the book *Salt*, by the Jewish writer Mark Kurlansky, Kurlansky’s reaction was dismissive: “Oh, he reads books?”

The dismissal has gone both ways. In August of 2009, for example, Obama's staff told the press that he was reading Thomas Friedman's *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*.

Unfortunately, Obama was also reported to have been reading that very same book in September of 2008. When asked about this discrepancy, Friedman gave Obama cover in the *Daily Beast*: "Given the pressure of a campaign, I doubt that the president got to read anything cover to cover. And for most of his presidency, the Great Recession has really swamped debate and discussion about climate and energy. So, I was very pleased to hear that he is diving into it again." It is hard to imagine Friedman's taking such a charitable view if George W. Bush had he been caught in the same kind of literary double accounting. Consider the irony: Poor President Bush was insulted by a Jewish author he had read while Obama was defended by a Jewish author whose book Obama hadn't fully read.

This defense of Obama should not come as a surprise: Jewish actors, producers, musicians, and performers of all kinds have also displayed great affection for him. In his presidential campaigns, support for Obama even became a form of performance art. In 2008, comedienne Sarah Silverman engaged in "The Great Schlep" southward to encourage elderly Jewish grandparents in Florida to vote for Obama, whom Silverman called "the goodest person we've ever had as a presidential choice."

Obama is an interesting case not only because his intense interest in pop culture brings him into contact with so many Jewish artists, but also because he is the first non-white male president. Before Obama, the presidency was a white male bastion, and in earlier, less-enlightened eras, Jews may have been seen as a "safer" ethnicity for presidential patronage than other, less-Caucasian ones. Jewish artists and the

presidents developed a symbiotic relationship: Jewish artists could provide presidents with a dash of ethnic color without forcing presidents to weigh in on complicated and complex subjects having to do with race.

This symbiosis, however, may be changing with Obama. Obama is not only an African-American male, but he has also opened up the White House to African-American artists in unprecedented ways. Just to take one example, rap has long been seen as a largely untouchable musical genre for national politicians, but Obama has freely admitted to having hip-hop songs in his iPod and welcoming hip hop artists to the White House. He has even weighed in on the behavior of Kanye West, famously telling David Samuels that West is brilliant but a “jackass.” Since Obama has broken so many taboos about how presidents deal with artists, it remains an open question if in doing so he will have obviated the symbiosis of Jewish artists and presidents.

What happens after Obama notwithstanding, the experience of presidents and Jewish writers presents a unique window into these artists’ comfort as Jews and their strength in shaping the culture. In all of these periods, the president of the United States served as an entry point for Jewish artists to demonstrate their relationship with American society at the time. The artists, of course, deserve credit for their artistic efforts and contributions. But in this area, it was the American presidents who have given Jews the signals concerning their level of acceptance in the goldene medina. For this reason, the ongoing and mutually beneficial relationship between our presidents and the American Jewish community will continue to help indicate where things stand for the American Jewish community, and it bears continued watching.

This article is adapted from What Jefferson Watched, Ike Read, and Obama Tweeted: 200 Years of Popular Culture in the White House.

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Ken Duberstein, R.I.P.



Ken Duberstein, former White House Chief of Staff for President Ronald Reagan (Ronald T. Bennett/Wikimedia Commons)

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By **TEVI TROY**
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The first Jewish White House chief of staff in history has died at 77.

KEN DUBERSTEIN, the first Jewish White House chief of staff in history, has died at 77. He served the Reagan administration ably and well, and went on to have a long private-sector career serving as a wise man of Washington.

A Brooklyn native, Duberstein went to Franklin & Marshall College before moving to Washington, D.C., where he interned for New York Republican senator Jacob Javits and earned a Master's degree from American University. He wrote his thesis on ethnic voting patterns in his native Brooklyn.

Duberstein served in the Department of Labor during the Ford administration, but got his big breaks in the Reagan administration. He started out as the White House aide responsible for relations with the House of Representatives. It was a tough job. While Reagan had a Republican Senate majority to work with, the Democrats controlled the House, requiring long hours and hard negotiations to advance the Reagan agenda. Once, when Reagan heard that Duberstein had spent his birthday engaged in budget negotiations, after also skipping his honeymoon for work, he wrote Duberstein a note saying, "First no honeymoon. Now no birthday celebration. I'm sure your Mom told you there'd be days like that."

Things were somewhat less partisan then, as the Reagan administration, with Duberstein's able assistance, was able to secure enough votes of conservative Democrats — and liberal Republicans — on some key issues to make things interesting. He played a key role in Reagan wins on tax cuts and the budget.

Duberstein was expected to maintain good relations with all of the various factions in a rapidly shifting environment. Jim Baker, White House chief of staff and himself a consummate staffer, said of Duberstein, "The guy is good," and marveled that Duberstein "just doesn't have enemies."

Humor and a good nature helped. The *New York Times*' Steven Weisman described Duberstein as "a ruffled, chain-smoking workaholic built like a football player and known for his wisecracks." He appreciated a good witticism from wherever it came. When a Democratic aide came up with the nickname "Beverly Hills budget" for Reagan's budget proposal, Duberstein complimented the aide for his cleverness, even as the jibe made Duberstein's job more difficult.



Duberstein did such a good job with the House that he was promoted to become Reagan's top legislative affairs aide, responsible for all of Reagan's congressional relations. He was 38.

He then left the Reagan administration, but his time in government was not finished. In Reagan's second term, the administration was rocked by the Iran-Contra scandal, and Reagan needed a steady hand to right the ship. Senator Howard Baker came in to serve as chief of staff, and he brought in Duberstein as his deputy. As Deputy Deuberdog — Baker's nickname for him — he took on whatever tasks Baker needed done, and was then promoted to chief of staff when Baker left.

As chief of staff, Duberstein developed a very strong working relationship with Colin Powell, then national-security adviser. Duberstein later recalled that he and Powell “ran the U.S. government for two years. A black who was raised on the streets of the South Bronx and a Brooklyn Jew were in these positions for the most conservative Republican president of the 20th century.” He and Powell remained close long after the administration ended.

Following the end of the Reagan administration, Duberstein had a quintessential post-White House chief of staff existence. He served on boards, set up his own consulting group, served on panels, gave journalists good quotes, and of course served as a consultant to *The West Wing*. He was always happy to be in the mix on things and generously gave advice to politicians of all ages. As one wag told me after Duberstein came for a visit to the Bush White House, “he was chief of staff for twenty months, and dined out on it for 20 years.” The actual months were shorter — 17 — and the years longer, but Duberstein, with his good sense of humor, would have appreciated the crack.

Politics these days is filled with angry people who fail to acknowledge the humanity or the sincerity of those on the other side of things. Cancel culture is typical of that kind of perspective, and the opposite of what Duberstein stood for. He was in politics to get things done, and to have fun along the way. As he once said, “I grew up in Brooklyn, and I think I've always enjoyed working with people. ‘I also like to deal directly with problems and to say, ‘Hey, let's cut through the small talk and let's go.’ I've always thought that was kind of fun.” Politics today could use some more Ken Dubersteins. R.I.P.

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