

A Two-State Solution for the United States and Israel

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We are slowly leaving the Bush presidency. Can we leave it fast enough for the safety of the world? George W. Bush thought it would be a good idea to help Israel celebrate its 60th birthday. So he showed up to celebrate, in spite of the gross contradiction his presence there offered against an appearance of impartiality in the negotiations between Israel and Palestine -- an accord whose success the president has said he intends to show as the diplomatic legacy of eight years in office.

In his speech to the Knesset, President Bush praised Israel in familiar and effusive terms. He also threatened Iran almost to the point of implying that Israel's birthday present from America would be a war against Iran initiated by the U.S. Finally, and strangely, he went out of his way -- in violation of a decorum observed by previous American presidents on foreign visits -- to attack a political rival in the United States.

Senator Biden, Barack Obama, and others were quick to respond to the charge that talking (not giving things away) to a hostile country must constitute "appeasement"; but the coat-trailing use of the word, meanwhile, caught the attention of the press; and Chris Matthews, interviewing a talk radio shouter, was led to some characteristic rumblings:

"You think it was fair to go overseas and take a shot at a fellow American?... Why is Israel now the center of the Republican Campaign?... Why the focus on Israel?... Why are we turning Israel into Hyde Park Corner?"

The questions are pertinent and not easy to answer. Why has Israel become the place to test an American politician for loyalty and strength? Loyalty to what and strength about what? Something about the American view of Israel, and his own exaggerated version of it, made George W. Bush believe he could get away with the provocative words he used and the graceless choice of an occasion.

In the American mind today, Israel stands for a policy of benign chauvinism, justified preemptive war, and provisional domination of the Middle East: the very policy the Bush administration has sought to graft onto the United States, while borrowing Israeli army rules of engagement for use in Iraq. Doubtless the unpopular president felt a certain exhilaration and nervous release in cutting down a member of his family (nationally speaking) in front of another family. But there was a personal as well as well as a generic reason for it. Probably Israel today seems to George Bush a friendlier place than most of America does. It is, to him, a sort of fifty-first state, a good deal like Texas but cleared of the protesters.

One might end here, merely observing that, not for the first time, George W. Bush acted below the dignity of his office. Yet his defects were forgiven by his hosts; and that is not where the interest of the occasion lies.

When an American of such high visibility speaks without inhibition of American divisions to Israelis, one is made to reflect on the extraordinary censorship exercised by the American mainstream media

against all allusion to the current political controversies in Israel. For example, the Israeli divisions over the oppressive treatment of the West Bank Palestinians. The word "appeasement" was misused by the president; but why should we not use it accurately? Why should Americans not follow the Israeli opposition, and speak of the appeasement by successive Israeli governments of the fanatical sects of settlers who seek to dispossess the Palestinians of their lands?

Condoleezza Rice broke the silence once. On a visit in October 2007, she said the sufferings of the West Bank Palestinians reminded her of the civil-rights struggles of American blacks in the South. Indeed, as Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar show in *Lords of the Land*, the more thuggish settlers in cities like Hebron have enjoyed many of the privileges that Americans associate with white gangs in the Jim Crow South -- a routine of harassment and ad-hoc violence against an inferior caste. The Israeli government acts as the federal government of the United States would have acted if it had said it could not move against the gangs because "these are our people."

Israel, Munich, and appeasement came up again when John McCain said, of Barack Obama's willingness to speak with diplomatic representatives of Iran, that one must never negotiate with anyone who calls Israel a "stinking corpse." But why should political thought be silenced and action obstructed by the trash talk of a small-time dictator? Demagogues say many things. It is in their nature not to be in a position to mean everything they say.

Nikita Khrushchev spoke for world communism in direr terms than these when he addressed to Americans the words: "We will bury you." Khrushchev went beyond calling his enemy a stinking corpse. He acknowledged that we were still alive, and said we were going to be turned into a corpse, and declared that he would be the one to do it. And Khrushchev actually held the levers of power in the Soviet Union -- something that cannot be said of Ahmadinejad in Iran. Yet President Eisenhower negotiated with Khrushchev, and President Kennedy negotiated with him, too. The idea that all contact with a hostile country that is not war, is therefore necessarily appeasement, is a poisonous offshoot of the Bush dogma which says "If you are not with us you are against us." Palestinians oppressed by Israeli settlers and looking anywhere they can for help are neither with the United States nor against us. If we treat them as enemies, they may well become enemies.

Another piece of the Bush doctrine -- a piece borrowed from Ariel Sharon, which John McCain seems poised to inherit -- is the idea that wars always improve the stature and increase the power of a warrior nation. Six years into the American occupation of Iraq, this ought to have become questionable. Yet John McCain's advisers on foreign policy are, to a man, neoconservatives -- supporters of the Lebanon as of the Iraq war, and disposed to flatter the militarism that is the most consistent trait of McCain's political temperament.

Israeli opinion covers a far wider range than American neoconservatism. In the Cooper Union debate on the "Israel Lobby" controversy, in September 2006, the former Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami said that the United States had become a Colossus -- "an intrusive colossus that is hated throughout the Arab world," because of its support for the Arab autocrats. The solution, Ben-Ami implied, was not for the U.S. to intrude still further into the affairs of the Middle East but to change its course and resist the promptings of organizations like AIPAC. He wondered why so many American lawmakers were intimidated by the lobby, since the most it could do was to stop someone from getting elected, and, where a public good was concerned, not to be elected or re-elected might seem a small sacrifice for a politician whose duty is to tell the truth.

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