

# Rabin and the Nixon Jews

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Last summer in Israel Yitzhak Rabin, Israeli Ambassador to Washington, suggested that Richard Nixon was the best friend Israel ever had in the White House. Upon his return to Washington before the November election the Ambassador explained that he had not endorsed Richard Nixon's candidacy, and he reaffirmed his country's neutrality in the Presidential election. Despite such assertions, many Americans, both Jews and non-Jews, interpreted Rabin's earlier statement as a Nixon endorsement by Israel. Six months later it is possible to assess the controversy with greater care.

One assessment comes from Ambassador Rabin himself. In December he told a gathering of Israelis in Long Beach, New York, that his initial statement had had a positive value for both Israel and American Jewry. Because of his statement, the Ambassador explained, Democratic candidates for the Presidency no longer took Jewish support for granted. Similarly, he suggested, the Republican Party now realized that it need not write off the Jewish vote. Therefore, the Ambassador concluded, political parties would take both Israel and American Jewry more seriously. American Jewish votes would have to be earned.

Unfortunately, a less glowing assessment of Rabin's comment suggests that he made three rather serious errors in analyzing American politics and society.

He subscribes to a set of beliefs about the relationship between votes, political support and policy formation within the American political system. This perspective leads him to credit the Jewish vote with great importance in the formation of American policy toward the Middle East. If he correctly evaluates the impact of the Jewish vote, then his endorsement of President Nixon made no sense. As the symposium

"McGovern, Nixon and the Jews" in the September, 1972, issue of *Commentary* argued, if McGovern were elected, he would support Israel and its policies for the same reasons as Nixon would. Similarly, either President Nixon or President McGovern might choose to reduce support for Israel in order to improve American relations with the Soviet Union and with certain Arab countries. Moreover, a revised American Middle East policy less favorable to Israel would satisfy large and important segments of American society, including the oil industry, which favors improved relations with the Arab world, and some Protestant churches, which want a "just" settlement of the Palestinian problem. In point of fact, President Nixon is freer today than a President McGovern would have been to take a pro-Arab stand. Nixon is not up for reelection, and most Jews who voted in the last election voted for McGovern!

Also, by August, 1972, it was evident to most political observers that Mr. Nixon did not need a large Jewish vote to be reelected by a significant majority. The converse was also evident. McGovern needed much more than a Jewish landslide to be within striking distance of victory. It is therefore doubtful that the increased Jewish vote for Nixon, for which Rabin might claim credit, will have any significant effect upon American policy in the Middle East.

Ambassador Rabin's basic assumption about the relationship between Jewish political support and policy formation is incorrect. He overestimates the Jewish influence. The Jewish vote is not the overriding factor in explaining the generally neutral or pro-Israel Middle East policy of American presidents since 1948. More important has been the absence of a national interest to do otherwise. The oil lobby has been unsuccessful in convincing the American people, Congress and the President that support for Israel significantly handicaps American oil interests in dealings with the Arab countries. When a President believed the national interest required a policy

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opposing the State of Israel, he acted accordingly. Recall the reaction of the United States government to the 1956 Suez crisis. Surely Ambassador Rabin realizes that, in shaping Middle East policies, President Nixon, like his predecessor in 1956, gives higher priority to the Soviet presence in the area, to oil and to inter-Arab politics than to the Jewish vote.

Perhaps Ambassador Rabin's greatest failure is in understanding the American Jewish community. His intense contact with American Jewry during the period since the Six-Day War may account for this misjudgment. Since May, 1967, there has been almost unanimous support for the State of Israel among major American Jewish organizations and most American Jews. Significantly, this solidarity has occurred at a time when the United States government generally has given overwhelming political and military support to Israel. The level of assistance after 1967 has no precedent in previous American Middle East policy. Typical of the new relationship was the American role in the United Nations during the week of the Six-Day War, along with the almost unrestricted sale of military arms to Israel since 1968. This pro-Israel policy of their government reinforces the high degree of Jewish solidarity for Israel. American Jewish support for Israel would decline were the White House to change its policies and define support for Israel as "a narrow Jewish interest." Does anyone really think that the organized American Jewish community would publicly challenge a Presidential policy that claimed great popular support?

Relevant to this is the experience of the organized American Jewish community during the 1930's with respect to President Roosevelt and Hitler's persecution of the Jews. American Jewry remained silent as President Roosevelt did almost nothing to condemn it, let alone to rescue German Jewry.<sup>o</sup> American Jewish leaders were afraid to challenge the President or to denounce his no-rescue policy because it had the support of most American people. Some Jewish organizations and newspapers censored atrocity stories and other news of the impending Holocaust so as not to give American Jewry cause to demand action or to criticize the American government.<sup>oo</sup>

The lesson of the thirties should be clear. Despite the concern of American Jewish organizations about their brethren in Germany, their response to their plight was determined by political and social factors in the United States. American Jewry has been, is, and probably will continue to be concerned primarily with its own self-interest, defined more by events within the United States than by events affecting Jews in the rest of the world, including Israel. Therein lies the reason for the increased Jewish vote for Nixon in the last election.

Unfortunately for Israel, the only real effect of the Ambassador's statement was to provide a rationale

for a large segment of traditionally Democratic American Jewry to vote for a Republican candidate for President. These Jews represented a cross section of the Orthodox, the wealthy, the suburban, the inner-city, the middle and working classes. Many of them, although not all, were afraid, angry and disillusioned with attempts to make American society more egalitarian. They were no longer willing to sacrifice in order to build a more just society. Many shared the view that Richard Nixon opposed social change and, especially, black demands for better jobs, housing and schools. Ironically, although some Jews opposed Senator McGovern on the grounds that he favored "affirmative action" quotas, they seemed to forget that the Nixon Administration had introduced and supported such policies in several important agencies.

Blacks, busing and quotas, not Israel, were the issues which mattered to most American Jews during the last Presidential election. Both candidates supported Israel; the actions of both would be restricted by American national interests. While McGovern's credibility seemed strained on this issue as on others, there was no assurance that President Nixon would remain a friend of Israel.

Despite Ambassador Rabin's belief in the positive value of his statement, the opposite is more nearly correct. Rabin's statement alienated large numbers of the young and of the academic community, who identified Richard Nixon with the bombing in Vietnam. Israel's image suffered among Jewish and non-Jewish liberals. For some in American society Rabin's comment gave credence to the extreme view that Israel is an outpost of American imperialism. This alienation of the Left came at a time when there was a definite waning of pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian support in the New Left and the Left in general.<sup>ooo</sup>

Rabin's silence during those months would have been preferable. Why alienate support among the young, liberals and large segments of the Left? Israeli silence would not have prevented Jews from supporting Nixon. It would have been, however, more difficult for these new Republicans to hide their real concerns behind the noble Jewish ideal of protecting Israel. By using Israel and Ambassador Rabin to dignify their self-interests, these "defenders of Israel" may have hurt her badly.

<sup>o</sup> Frederick A. Lazin, "The Reaction of American Jewry to Hitler's anti-Jewish policies, 1933-1939." Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Chicago; David Brody, "American Jews, the Refugees and Immigration Restrictions-1932-1942," publication of the American Jewish Historical Society, XLV (September, 1955-1956).

<sup>oo</sup> Some Jewish newspapers after 1933 and until 1938 edited, or did not print, atrocity stories from Germany. See the *Chicago Sentinel*, 1931-1939; also the *American Jewish Yearbook's* coverage of Jewish protests and criticisms of President Roosevelt and his policy after 1935.

<sup>ooo</sup> See, for example, Sol Stern, "My Jewish Problem and Ours," *Ramparts Magazine* (August, 1970).