

DOUGLASS CASSEL
CENTER FOR CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS
301 NOTRE DAME LAW SCHOOL
Notre Dame, Indiana USA 46556
(574) 631-7895
Doug.Cassel@nd.edu

September 26, 2007

Worldview Commentary No. 267 on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM WBEZ

“Opening the Debate on Israel”

The United States gives far more aid to Israel than to any other country. The US is also known around the world as Israel’s ultimate diplomatic shield. When most or all other countries in the United Nations Security Council support resolutions condemning Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians, the US almost always vetoes or waters them down.

This “special relationship” between the US and Israel traditionally rests on several grounds. One is the Holocaust, the culmination of millennia of Western anti-Semitism. The US record on the eve of the Holocaust was shameful: even after Hitler had already begun to put into practice his murderous hatred of Jews, we turned away a Jewish refugee ship, sending its passengers back to face death in Europe.

During the Cold War, there was also a strategic rationale to ally with Israel as the only reliably democratic and capitalist nation in a region where we were in stiff competition with the Soviets.

The US and Israel also share many values reflecting our common Judeo-Christian ethical and religious heritage and our democratic political systems – despite the troubled history of the relationships between our faiths, and the imperfections of both our democracies.

And both nations retain mutual sympathy and common interests in confronting extremist Islamic terrorism.

At the same time, however, questions arise. Does our virtually unqualified support for Israel inflame passions against us in the Arab and Muslim worlds, undermining our diplomacy and provoking more terrorism against us? Polls show that large numbers of Americans, and solid majorities of our military and intelligence experts, believe that the answer is “yes.”

Questions of values also arise. Can we square our tolerance of expanded Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory with our principles of self-determination? Can we swallow the devastation inflicted by Israel on Lebanese civilians in last year’s war? Questions like these undermine our moral credibility, not only in the Middle East, but throughout the world.

Yet Israel’s settlements and its conduct in Lebanon – even though hotly and publicly debated in Israel -- are rarely the subject of serious debate in the US. Presidential candidates in both parties compete to see who can be more pro-Israel than the next.

In this context two respected scholars – historian John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and international relations specialist Stephen Walt of Harvard – contribute a valuable kick start to public debate with their new book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*.

Their thesis – first aired last year in a lengthy article in the *London Review of Books* – is that the overwhelming American support for Israel goes far beyond anything that can be justified on either strategic or moral grounds. What accounts for our lop-sided support, they say, is the effectiveness of the Israel lobby – American supporters of Israel. The lobby not only ensures strong and unqualified political support for Israel, but stifles any serious criticism of that support.

The reaction to their article and book partially confirms their thesis. Mearsheimer and Walt were smeared as anti-Semites and barred from speaking in venues such as the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, where both have spoken in the past on other topics.

Mearsheimer and Walt are no anti-Semites, and leveling such accusations against them does nothing to advance public debate. Recalling the historic suffering of the Jews, their book argues that there is a strong moral case for the existence of the Jewish State. If Israel's existence were ever threatened, they say, the US should come to its defense.

Their concept of the Israel lobby is nothing like the “Jewish conspiracy” theories of anti-Semites like David Duke, whom they repudiate. In their view, the lobby is not a cabal or conspiracy, but a loose coalition of the like-minded, an exemplar of good old-fashioned interest group politics, the bread and butter of American democracy.

They do not conjure up some all-powerful lobby, capable of controlling American institutions and always winning in Washington. Instead they depict a lobby that is extremely influential and effective in ensuring consistent American support for Israel.

A case in point, they argue, is the war in Iraq. The prime movers for the war in the Administration were a group of neoconservative supporters of Israel – like Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith in the Pentagon – who had long advocated taking out Saddam Hussein.

Until 9/11, their quest seemed hopeless. But after 9/11, they convinced both Dick Cheney and George Bush to invade Iraq. Although Israeli leaders saw Iran as a greater threat, they were happy to support a war against Iraq as a first step.

Thus, as Mearsheimer and Walt document, a full year before we invaded Iraq, Israeli leaders ranging from Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu to Labor's Shimon Peres joined American neoconservatives like Charles Krauthammer and Mortimer Zuckerman in publicly advocating for the war.

The end result in Iraq and elsewhere, argue Mearsheimer and Walt, is not in the interest of either the US or Israel. Although well-documented, their contentions are not beyond dispute. Leslie Gelb, former President of the Council on Foreign Relations, challenges their analysis in a recent commentary in the *New York Times*.

In my view Mearsheimer and Walt have the better of the argument. But Gelb's threshold point is clearly right: for those who may disagree with these two distinguished scholars, the proper response is not to denounce them, but to debate them.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are generally broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, and rebroadcast at 9 PM in the evening. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.