

[walt & mearsheimer's slingshot]

# The Lobby Strikes Back

A new book riles the AIPAC crowd, but makes it to the bestseller list anyway.

By Scott McConnell

ONE PRISM through which to gauge the impact of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's *The Israel Lobby and American Foreign Policy* is a September incident involving Barack Obama. His campaign had placed small ads in various spots around the Internet, designed to drive readers to its website. One turned up on Amazon's page for the Walt and Mearsheimer book. A vigilant watchdog at the *New York Sun* spotted it and contacted the campaign: Did Obama support Walt and Mearsheimer?

The answer came within hours. The ad was withdrawn. Its placement was "unintentional." The senator, his campaign made clear, understood that key arguments of the book were "wrong," but had definitely not read the work himself. In short, Walt and Mearsheimer had reached a pinnacle of notoriety.

Though *The Israel Lobby* was on the way to best-sellerdom and has become perhaps the most discussed policy book of the year, the presidential candidate touted as the most fresh-thinking and intellectually curious in the race hastened to make clear he had not been corrupted by the toxic text.

The episode illustrates one of the book's central arguments: the Israel lobby is powerful, and American politicians fear its wrath. Any Democrat running for president—drawing on a donor

stream that is heavily Jewish, very interested in Israel, and perceived as hawkish—would have reacted as Obama did.

In their book's introduction, Walt and Mearsheimer summarize the consequences of this power. In an election year, American politicians will differ radically on domestic issues, social issues, immigration, China, Darfur, and virtually any other topic. But all will "go to considerable lengths to express their deep personal commitment to one foreign country—Israel—as well as their determination to maintain unyielding support for the Jewish state." The authors find this remarkable and deserving of analysis, which they provided first in a paper, posted last year on Harvard's Kennedy School website and published in the *London Review of Books*, and now expanded into a book.

This is not the first time a prominent American has taken on the subject. George Ball, undersecretary of state in the Johnson and Kennedy administrations and the government official most prescient about Vietnam, a bona fide member of the Wall Street and Washington establishments, called for the recalibration of America's Israel policy in a much noted *Foreign Affairs* essay in 1977, and at the end of his life co-authored a book on the subject with his son. Eleven-term congressman Paul

Findley, defeated after a former AIPAC president called him "a dangerous enemy of Israel," wrote a book that became a bestseller, and there are others.

But no one with the combined skills and eminence of Walt and Mearsheimer has before addressed the subject systematically. These two are mandarins of American academia, having reached the top of a field that attracts smart people. They have tenure, job security, and professional autonomy most journalists lack. They have the institutional prestige of Harvard and the University of Chicago behind them. Most importantly, they bring first-rate skills of research, synthesis, and argument to their task.

One might wish that their book had been different in some ways—more literary, more discursive, more precise in some of its definitions, deeper in some areas, more (my favorite, from blogger Tony Karon) "dialectical." But *The Israel Lobby* is an extraordinary accomplishment, completed with great speed—a dense, factually based brief of an argument that is often made but rarely made well.

In public appearances discussing their book, Walt and Mearsheimer are tremendously effective: measured, facts at their fingertips, speaking with the fluency of men accustomed to addressing demanding audiences. Most of all, while treating a

subject where hyperbole is common, they are moderate. They are respectful of Israel, admiring of its accomplishments, and extremely aware that criticism of Israel or the Israel lobby can turn ugly and demagogic. As might be expected of top scholars in America, they are fully conscious of what Jews have suffered in the past and how much anti-Semitism has been a moral blot on the West as a whole. So while they have none of the excessive deference, guilt feelings, and reluctance to engage so typical of the remaining WASP elite, they are very well-modulated. Their detractors would have preferred loose-tongued adversaries, Palestinians whose words are raw with loss and resentment, a left wing anti-Zionist like Noam Chomsky, or genuine anti-Semites. Instead, with Walt and Mearsheimer, they are encountering something like the American establishment of a vanished era at its calm, patriotic best.

It is obvious that *The Israel Lobby*, both the article and the book, would be extremely unwelcome to those pleased with the status quo. Under the current arrangement, the United States gives Israel \$3-4 billion in aid and grants a year—about \$500 per Israeli and several orders of magnitude more than aid to citizens of any other country. Israel is the only American aid recipient not required to account for how the money is spent. Washington uses its Security Council veto to shield Israel from critical UN resolutions and periodically issues bland statements lamenting the continued expansion of Israeli settlements on the Palestinian land the Jewish state has occupied since 1967. When Israel violates U.S. law, as it did in Lebanon by using American-made cluster bombs against civilian targets, a low-level official may issue a mild complaint. These fundamentals of the relationship go unchallenged by 95 percent of American politicians holding or running for national office.

Walt and Mearsheimer's goal was to ignite a conversation about the lobby—which they define expansively as an amorphous array of individuals, think tanks, and congressional lobbying groups that advocate Israeli perspectives—and its consequences, which they believe are damaging to America's core strategic interests in the Middle East. They support Israel's existence as a Jewish state, and while they readily summarize Israeli blemishes, drawing on Israeli sources and the arguments of the country's revisionist "new historians," they are fully aware that no modern state has been built without injustices. They seek a more normal United States relationship with Israel, rather like we have with France or Spain, and an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement that can start to drain the poison out of American relations with the Arab world.

At least in a preliminary sense, they have started a discussion. The initial working paper on the Kennedy School website was downloaded 275,000 times, throwing Israel's most ferocious partisans into a panic. Deploying a McCarthyite tactic, the *New York Sun* quickly sought to link the authors to white supremacist David Duke. *The New Republic* published a basketful of hostile pieces. Several pro-Israel congressmen initiated an embarrassing effort—ignored by the institution's president—to get the Naval War College to cancel scheduled lectures by the two. In a column about "the Mearsheimer-Walt fiasco," neoconservative writer Daniel Pipes summed up his dilemma: it would have been better, Pipes said, to have ignored the essay by "two obscure academics" so that it disappeared "down the memory hole" instead of becoming "the monument that it now is." Pipes was wrong about this. Hostile reaction to the piece hadn't inspired a quarter of a million downloads. With the United

States mired in a quagmire in Iraq, increasingly detested in the Muslim world, and wedded to an Israel policy that, beyond America's borders, seems bizarre to friend and foe alike, Walt and Mearsheimer had touched a topic that was crying out for serious analysis.

And the book could do more than the article. Arguments could be filled out, footnotes could be easily read. The 2006 Lebanon War—which saw the American Congress endorse the Israeli bombardment by the kind of margin that would satisfy Nicolae Ceausescu, while seeming genuinely puzzled that moderate Arab leaders did not join their applause—was analyzed as a test case. A book could continue the discussion and deepen it. But the book's enemies (how odd that a book could have enemies, but there is no better word for it) had time to prepare their ideological trenches, and within a month or two of publication, one could see the shape of the defense.

By the end of October, two months after *The Israel Lobby* appeared in stores, there had not been a single positive review in the mass-market media. For a long time it seemed that no editor dared trust the subject to a gentile, causing blogger Philip Weiss to ask cheekily, "Do the goyim get to register an Opinion Re Walt/Mearsheimer?" By then, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, the *New York Sun*, and *The New Republic* between them must have printed 25 attacks on Walt and Mearsheimer, virtually all of them designed to portray the authors as beyond the pale of rational discourse.

Anti-Semitism was not a credible charge. The authors make clear that the lobby isn't representative of the views of all or even most American Jews, and they support an Israel within recognized boundaries. Their recommendation that the United States treat Israel like a normal country is hard to demonize.

Ditto their repeated assertions that lobbying is a perfectly normal part of the American system and that conflicted or divided loyalties have become commonplace in the modern world. But what many did was to discuss the book in a context of anti-Semitism, to convey the impression that *The Israel Lobby* was a deeply anti-Semitic book without explicitly saying so. Thus Jeffrey Goldberg, in a 6,000-word *New Republic* piece, introduced Walt and Mearsheimer after a detour through Osama bin Laden, Father Coughlin, Charles Lindbergh, and, of course, David Duke. He eventually called the book “the most sustained attack ... against the political enfranchisement of American Jews since the era of Father Coughlin.”

Samuel G. Freedman in the *Washington Post* opened his discussion of the book by invoking the New Testament concept of original sin, whose burden one can escape only through acceptance of Jesus Christ. A passage from Romans, Freedman claims, framed the book’s argument—“if unintentionally.” When was the last time the *Washington Post* introduced a serious foreign affairs book with Bible talk that had no bearing on the work in question?

One of several *Wall Street Journal* attacks on the work claimed, “it is apparently the authors’ position that ... [in the face of Arab lobbying efforts] American Jews are obliged to stay silent.” This statement is more than a misrepresentation of Walt and Mearsheimer’s argument, it is a flat-out lie. Did the editors who assigned and published the piece know this? Was discrediting the book so important that normal American journalistic standards had to be waived?

Another track of the demonization campaign was the repeated effort to cancel the authors’ appearances or to demand that opposing speakers be invited to “rebut” their noxious views, a

format hardly typical for authors on book tours. Unfortunately, these initiatives sometimes succeeded, as when the Chicago Council for Global Affairs cancelled an event at a venue where the two professors had spoken many times before. Some efforts to marginalize the book were more like parody, as when Congressman Elliot Engel complained that Professor Mearsheimer had been invited to participate in a Columbia Uni-

**SOME EFFORTS TO MARGINALIZE THE BOOK WERE MORE LIKE PARODY, AS WHEN CONGRESSMAN ENGEL COMPLAINED THAT PROFESSOR MEARSHEIMER HAD BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN A COLUMBIA FORUM ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM.**

versity forum on academic freedom.

It would be naïve to think that the campaign waged against the authors had no impact. It managed to muddy the debate about the book. Even on some of the wonkier Washington blogs, where there was manifest interest in contending with the book’s arguments, the focus got shifted to whether *The Israel Lobby* was anti-Semitic. As one frustrated commenter on Ezra Klein’s blog wrote, “[P]art of the theory is that the power of the ‘lobby’ is to effectively remove certain topics from the debate. And the closest we come to debating those topics is a meta-discussion of whether debating those topics is appropriate or some evidence of anti-semitism/self hating Jewry.” Klein rued that “marginalizing the authors as anti-semitic is more effective than arguing back their viewpoint.”

The barrage also had an intimidation effect, a sort of “shock and awe” for the political journalism set. What humble book-review editor could fail to be impressed by the sheer volume of rhetoric painting the book as disreputable or avoid wondering what bombs might explode under his own career if he asked former national security adviser Brent

Scowcroft or Palestinian-American professor Rashid Khalidi to review the book. Television producers took note as well. While Mearsheimer managed an amiable ten minutes on “The Colbert Report,” the authors got nowhere near the regular public-affairs discussion shows. Scholars and writers got the message: if men as esteemed in their field as Walt and Mearsheimer were subject to the Coughlin/Duke treatment and had their

appearances cancelled, surely those less cushioned by tenure and eminence had good cause to keep silent. This probably explained the sheer ferocity of the campaign against *The Israel Lobby*.

Not all the negative reviews were as egregious as those cited above. But those that tried to address the substance of the book tended to land weak blows. Les Gelb’s critique in the *New York Times* was representative. His central point was that if the Israel lobby—actually, he incorrectly claimed that Walt and Mearsheimer called it a “Jewish lobby”—was indeed so powerful, why has every American president over the past 40 years “privately favored” the return of the Palestinian territories and the establishment of a Palestinian state, and why has Washington consistently “expressed displeasure” at Israel’s settlement expansion? This is precisely the question to which Walt and Mearsheimer provide an answer. If, as is indeed the case, most American presidents have “privately” sought Israeli withdrawal, and since Israel is extraordinarily dependent on American largesse, why has the United States never seriously put pressure on Israel to stop the settlements and give

back the land? How did Israel manage to move 400,000 settlers into the West Bank in 40 years, often using American funds, if this was contrary to the wishes of every president? Gelb goes on to acknowledge that Walt and Mearsheimer were prescient in their opposition to Bush's Iraq folly, but asserts that the Israel lobby had nothing to do with the decision to go to war. Bush and Cheney needed no lobbying on this point, and they don't about Iran either.

This last area is easily the most disputed point between Walt and Mearsheimer and those reviewers who sought to answer their book rather than smear it. The Israel lobby, the two assert, helped drive the United States into Baghdad. It couldn't have done it by itself—that required 9/11 and Bush and Cheney. But, argue Mearsheimer and Walt, “absent the lobby's influence, there almost certainly would not have been a war. The lobby was a necessary but not sufficient condition for a war that is a strategic disaster for the United States.”

This is a powerful polemical charge, if only because tens of millions of Americans who could care less who has sovereignty over the West Bank recognize that the Iraq War has been a painful failure on every level. But is it true? *The Economist* says the argument about Iraq “doesn't quite stand up,” but might make sense if “neoconservatives and the Israel lobby were the same thing.” Leonard Fein, who writes on the dovish Americans for Peace Now website, called the charge “monstrous” and accused the authors of treating the lobby and neoconservatives “as if the two are interchangeable.” Are they?

On one aspect of the argument, the historical record is clear. The two authors do valuable service by documenting the near hysterical “attack Iraq now” recommendations made by various Israeli politicians to American audiences during the run-up to the war.

Benjamin Netanyahu, whom the U.S. Congress customarily treats with the kind of deference it might reserve for a Lincoln returned from the dead, warned senators and congressmen that Saddam was developing nukes that could be delivered in suitcases and satchels, and Shimon Peres told Americans that Saddam was as dangerous as bin Laden. The lobbying was so blatant that some political consultants warned Israel to cool it, lest Americans come to believe that the war in Iraq was waged “to protect Israel rather than to protect America.” AIPAC, too, pushed for the invasion. It is clear that the Israel lobby, as everyone understands it, was part of the rush-to-war atmosphere that swept the capital in 2002.

#### IN 1979, MENACHEM BEGIN GAVE JERRY FALWELL A PRIVATE JET AS A GIFT AND SOON AFTER BESTOWED UPON HIM THE JABOTINSKY MEDAL .

But the critics do have a point: AIPAC and similar groups played a comparatively minor part in the frenzy. But what of the neoconservatives, who had openly pushed for war against Saddam since the late 1990s and who held several key posts in the Bush administration?

For Walt and Mearsheimer, neoconservatives are an integral part of the lobby, and indeed, for their argument to make sense, the lobby has to be defined broadly. Of course there is AIPAC, which exists to influence Congress, and its myriad associated groups that raise money for candidates. The recent emergence of Christian Zionism as an electoral force is an important addition, adding ethnic and social diversity and increased political weight to the lobby. This is a sociologically and psychologically rich area, which the authors don't explore as deeply as they might. What currents in American Protestantism suddenly made Israel so compelling? It is

interesting to learn, for example, that in 1979, Menachem Begin gave Jerry Falwell a private jet as a gift and soon after bestowed upon him the Jabotinsky Medal for “outstanding achievement.” (Other recipients include Elie Wiesel and Leon Uris.) But such facts, intriguing as they are, don't entirely speak for themselves. And whatever enhanced political clout Christian Zionism brought to the lobby, it did not include access and influence to inner decision-making sanctums of the Pentagon and White House or the ability to start a war.

That required the neoconservatives. The path that took the United States from 9/11 to Iraq has yet to be precisely documented, but it is generally accepted that Bush, Cheney, and other key policy-

makers became converts to neoconservative views after the attack, if they weren't already sympathetic. This is important because neoconservatism has a broad gravitational pull that more focused lobbying groups, no matter how effective, can never match.

It is one thing to motivate a senator or congressman to vote for “pro-Israel” legislation—and AIPAC does that well. The recent Kyl-Lieberman bill labeling Iran's military “terrorist” was reportedly first drafted by AIPAC, and an AIPAC aide's boast that he could have the signatures of 70 senators on a napkin within 24 hours was altogether believable.

But that kind of lobbying has obvious limitations. How many of those 70 senators would vote the lobby's way while discretely rolling their eyes, disliking the pressure they are subjected to but willing to go along because it is the course of least resistance? People don't start wars for such reasons.



Neoconservatism is something far more than advocacy of the interests of a foreign country. It is a full-blown ideological system, which shapes the way people interpret events and view their own society and its relation to the world. Yes, its foreign-policy views are strongly pro-Israel. The main shapers of neoconservatism would readily argue that their foreign-policy positions were good for Israel, while those they opposed imperiled the Jewish state. No one who has spent time with major neocons would doubt the centrality of Israel to their worldview or their attachment to the no-compromise-with-Arabs parts of the Israeli political spectrum. But such attitudes come embedded in a larger set of viewpoints, which are now fairly disseminated among the American elite. While it is one thing for a lawmaker to accommodate the Israel lobby over something like the Kyl-Lieberman bill, it

*Assassin's Gate*, *New Yorker* writer and author George Packer gives one of the most nuanced portraits of the attitudes of the Bush administration's intellectuals, exploring the difficult to pin down matter of how intellectuals' attitudes seep into policy choices.) But in view of their convictions and pivotal positions inside the executive branch and ability to shape policy at the very top, to say that neoconservatives "overlap" with the Israel lobby hardly does them justice: the faction might more properly be described as, to borrow the well-known phrase, the highest stage of the Israel lobby.

Moreover, as an ideological movement, neoconservatism has a reach that more focused pro-Israel advocacy could never duplicate. Does one call Donald Rumsfeld a neoconservative? Few do. While obviously quite capable, he isn't known as an intellectual, isn't Jewish

and those abroad. In England, reviewers for the major papers (including the Murdoch-owned *Times*) treated the book's argument as self-evidently true. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, author of a prize-winning book on Zionism, noted in *The Guardian* that it must be obvious to a 12 year old that the Israel alliance, "far from advancing American interests, gravely damages them and has hindered every American endeavour in Arab countries or the whole Muslim world." Israel's most influential paper, *Ha'aretz*, ran a review by Daniel Levy, who was involved in the last serious round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. He told his readers that Walt and Mearsheimer's most shrill detractors either had "not read the book, are emotionally incapable of dealing with harsh criticism of something they hold so close, or are intentionally avoiding substantive debate on the issue." Like others, Levy draws a line between the neocons and the Israel lobby proper and explains the Iraq War as a sort of perfect storm: Bush and Cheney, 9/11, many neoconservatives in the executive branch, and for the first time a Republican administration with Christian Zionists as a substantial part of its electoral base. He regrets that mainstream parts of the lobby have been co-opted by the neocons and closes with a plea for moderate Israelis to take American politics seriously and devote as much attention to forming American alliances as the Israeli Right does. This is very welcome advice, for Americans as well, because, as Walt and Mearsheimer stress (and Levy helpfully repeats), it is not Israel per se but Israel as an occupier that constitutes a major strategic liability for the United States.

But it should be noted that casual newspaper readers in Israel, in Britain, and soon in the rest of Europe, where the book is being translated into seven languages, are being treated to far more

## IT IS NOT ISRAEL PER SE BUT ISRAEL AS AN OCCUPIER THAT CONSTITUTES A MAJOR STRATEGIC LIABILITY FOR THE UNITED STATES.

is quite another for an executive-branch policymaker to see the world through a neocon perspective, to have fully internalized slogans like "moral clarity" and "Islamofascism" and "the lessons of appeasement" and elevated them as lodestars.

Neoconservatives did play a crucial role in preparing the Iraq War—in the press, in generating dubious intelligence conclusions and piping them into the executive branch, and in framing an argument that George Bush would be "surrendering" to terror if he didn't attack Iraq. It was a performance that more conventional lobbying organizations like AIPAC or the Zionist Organization of America couldn't match in their wildest dreams. Walt and Mearsheimer don't go into this history deeply. (In *The*

(though of course not all neocons are Jewish), isn't an ex-liberal or leftist. He is usually described as a Republican "nationalist," though he pretty much delegated Iraq policy to men—Paul Wolfowitz, Doug Feith, and others—who fit most classical definitions of "neoconservative." But there are connections: in the 1980s Rumsfeld was enlisted by Midge Decter to chair the neoconservative Committee for the Free World, so certainly the neocon cast of mind was not unfamiliar to him. In short, just as the boundaries of the Israel lobby are blurry, so are those of neoconservatism. The revival of terms like "fellow traveler" would probably be helpful.

The most striking aspect of the reception of *The Israel Lobby* was the distance between the reviews in the U.S.

nanced and serious discussion of *The Israel Lobby* than Americans have been.

At least there has been the blogosphere. One wouldn't know it from the major American newspapers or magazine reviews, but a fresh breeze is beginning to blow. *The Israel Lobby* did receive more attention on the serious blogs than any other book this year. M.J. Rosenberg, the director of policy analysis for Israel Policy Forum and a prominent "two-state solution" advocate, describes the influence of the book as enormous: "Capitol Hill staffers are talking about the book, everybody is arguing about it, people are intrigued. ... it has opened up discussion."

Despite, or perhaps because of, ferocious attacks in *The New Republic* and the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Israel Lobby* made it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. It remained there only a couple of weeks, soon displaced by Alan Greenspan's memoir and Laura Ingraham's latest. But the book's influence is still early in its trajectory. International sales will be large, there will be paperback editions, and the book will be assigned in course readings. *The Israel Lobby* will be around a long time, perhaps longer than AIPAC itself. Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery has already compared the work to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Philip Weiss to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. To build upon Tony Karon's analogy that glasnost is breaking out in the American Jewish community, and that younger Jews are questioning Israel like never before, *The Gulag Archipelago* didn't receive good reviews in Russia when it came out either.

Walt and Mearsheimer haven't written the last word on American-Israeli relations. Other books, more psychologically probing and more discursive, are in the works or waiting to be written. But in clearing the first path since the pivotal date of 9/11, these two authors have done their country a great service. ■

### **Turkish officials and senior military officers are angry about the results of the Nov. 5 meeting in Washington**

between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President George W. Bush. An agreement was reached whereby the U.S. would not oppose Turkey's plans to launch air strikes against the PKK in Northern Iraq whenever the Turks have "actionable intelligence" on PKK targets. The U.S. promised to provide information on the terrorists, including location data for bombing attacks, but Turkish military officers believe this is a delaying tactic by Bush. The key word is "actionable." They doubt that any genuine operational intelligence on PKK targets will come from the U.S. and that the "actionable" requirement gives Americans *de facto* control over Turkish military actions inside Iraq. It is not clear to what extent Erdogan knew he was being manipulated.



### **On Nov. 2, Al Jazeera's website alleged that the still secret Sept. 6 Israeli air force raid over Syria was actually carried out by the U.S. Air Force.**

The website quoted anonymous Israeli and Arab sources as saying that two American jets armed with tactical nuclear weapons carried out an attack on a nuclear site under construction, with Israeli F-15 and F-16 jets providing cover for the U.S. planes. According to the report, the site was hit by one bomb and was totally destroyed. Intelligence sources in the U.S. state that the Al Jazeera report is false and is disinformation that plays to the common misperception that everything Israel does is directed by the United States, though it is not clear who had a motive to spread the story. If a tactical nuclear device had been used for the attack, there would have been considerable radioactive residue in the air that would have been detected. Also, it is not clear why the USAF should have been involved at all since the Israelis, who have not signed a peace treaty with Syria, were fully capable of undertaking the attack.



### **The National Intelligence Estimate is the intelligence community's "best assessment" of a foreign-policy issue, but the politically manipulated 2002 NIE on Iraq was full of false information and bad assessments that contributed to the Iraq War.**

The "lessons learned" from Iraq have meant that all of the information and judgments of the impending NIE on Iran are being looked at very critically. The report is already more than one year late, and it has apparently been rejected in three different drafts because the White House does not find its conclusions "strong enough." The problem is that intelligence on Iran is poor, and no one is comfortable with taking a hard position on the alleged nuclear-weapons program or on other key issues. Nevertheless, the White House continues to want a document that can be used to support military action if that should become necessary. A leading analyst working on the report believes that no matter what the outcome, the probability that there will be a war with Iran in the next nine months is 85 percent.

*Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a partner in Cannistraro Associates, an international security consultancy.*