

# Looking Into the Lobby

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual conference is one of Washington's most important—and least reported—events.

By Philip Weiss

FOR THREE DAYS in the capital in early June, suspense built over the question of how the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference would greet Barack Obama. There was a lot of grousing about Obama in the hallways of the Washington Convention Center, and AIPAC officials repeatedly warned the faithful to be respectful. "We are not a debate society or a protest movement. ... our goal is to have a friend in the White House," executive director Howard Kohr said in a strict tone. It wasn't hard to imagine things going poorly: Obama gets booed on national television. He feels insulted. Conservative Jewish donors and voters turn off to Obama. He becomes president without their support. AIPAC has no friend in the Oval Office.

But of course, Obama complied. His speech became the annual example the conference provides of a powerful man truckling. Two years ago, it was Vice President Cheney's red-meat speech attacking the Palestinians. Last year, it was Pastor John Hagee's scary speech saying that giving the Arabs any part of Jerusalem was the same as giving it to the Taliban. Obama took a similar line. He suggested that he would use force to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons, made no mention of Palestinian human rights, and said that Jerusalem "must remain undivided," a statement so disastrous to the peace process that his staff rescinded it the next day. Big deal. The actual meeting had gone swimmingly.

This was my first AIPAC conference, and the first surprise was how blatant the business of wielding influence is. The conference makes no bones about this function, the most savage expression of which is the Tuesday dinner at which AIPAC performs its "roll call," where the names of all the politicians who have come to the conference are read off from the stage by three barkers in near auctioneer fashion. The pols try to outdo one another in I-love-Israel encomia. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi surely won the day when she teared up while dangling the dogtags of three Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah and Hamas two years ago.

The second big surprise was that apart from coverage of the headline speakers, the AIPAC conference is a media no man's land. It would be hard to imagine a more naked exhibition of political power: a convention of 7,000 mostly rich people, with more than half the Congress in attendance, as well as all the major presidential candidates, the prime minister of Israel, the minority leader, the majority leader, and the speaker of the House. Yet there is precious little journalism about the spectacle in full. The reason seems obvious: the press would have to write openly about a forbidden subject, Jewish influence. They would have to take on an unpleasant informative task that they have instead left to two international relations scholars in their 50s—Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, authors of last year's book *The Israel Lobby*.

The press is missing a phantasmagorical event. Imagine a basement meeting in the Warsaw Ghetto transplanted to the biggest hall in Vegas, and you have something of the feeling of the thing. The staging is flawless. Little documentaries called "Zionist Stories" play on the Jumbotron, complete with footage of Auschwitz, and then the subject of the documentary comes out on stage to thundering applause. There is breakout session after breakout session on Middle East policy and Jewish identity and anti-Semitism, with star turns by Natan Sharansky, Bill Kristol, and Leon Wieseltier. The press was excluded from "Advanced Lobbying Techniques," but still this is a feast of the political condition. And posh. The roll call is described by AIPAC as the largest seated dinner in Washington. The wine flows. I went about in a daze of awe and admiration.

My awe was for men like Haim Saban, a toymaker and giant donor to the Democratic Party. After his Zionist story, Saban came out on stage wearing a platinum tie and white shirt and silver gray suit. He has wonderful presence and something of an Arab look—black-haired, wide forehead. He was surrounded by 200 college students, veterans of the Saban Leadership Seminars he sponsors at AIPAC.

On Middle East policy, Saban is barely distinguishable from his Republican counterparts, who are there in equal force. The main hall of the conference

was filled with lavishly-produced banners featuring AIPAC donors, not a few with trophy wives, alongside statements of their mission. There was Donald Diamond, an Arizona real estate developer whom the *New York Times* recently profiled on the front page after he raised \$250,000 for John McCain. The *Times* said nothing in its piece about Diamond's Israel work. But that was all the banner was about. "The U.S.-Israel relationship is the single most important determinant of democracy in the world, and we must commit to securing it," Diamond wrote. "It is so obvious to us that the Jewish community is a family and that we have to take care of each other."

I was writing that down when an AIPAC spokesman stopped to check my credentials. The audience for this stuff isn't the public, it's people in the hall—other rich Jews who might put AIPAC in their wills.

At most conventions, people gather out of self-interest. Therein lies my admiration: the AIPAC'ers didn't come for selfish reasons. They are devoutly concerned with the lives of people they don't know, very far away. Yes, people with whom they feel tribal kinship. When Israelis came out on the dais to speak, they were almost invariably overwhelmed by the generosity, if not the Vegas schmaltz. "There is a tremendous amount of love in this place," Meir Nissensohn, an Israeli executive of IBM, said in wonder. "If it was a beaker, it would explode." Even a sharp critic like myself of what AIPAC is doing to American policy in the Middle East was frequently moved by the pure loving feeling that surrounds you at every moment.

Among the devout there is only one real issue: What is the latest AIPAC line? This is the organization's function. After consulting closely with the Israeli political leadership (leaning toward the right wing), AIPAC regurgitates a simple ver-

sion of Israeli policy to its followers, who in turn regurgitate that line to American politicians. AIPAC'ers do this with the conviction that Israel's life is on the line. "It is we that are the guardians of that relationship," AIPAC president David Victor said. James Tisch, the Lowes executive and leader in the Jewish community, warned the audience that it might be 1939 all over again were it not for them.

AIPAC makes sure the Israeli line is America's line by cultivating politicians before they reach the national scene. Victor described this process when he warned the audience that 10 percent of Congress will be new next year because so many seats are open: "Do we know them? Do they know us? Have they been to Israel? Do they understand the issues we care so deeply about?" Finding Israel activists in the suburbs of Detroit is easy, Victor said. "But how about finding the one right person to reach out to candidates for communities like Muscle

Israel came from many people and sources, not specifically from Mr. Hasten.") Dan Senor, an analyst on CNN and former AIPAC intern, boasted that AIPAC won over Spencer Abraham when he was the head of the state Republican Party, years before he became a Michigan senator. The party was \$500,000 in debt, and an AIPAC leader helped him pay that off. And of course, the famous story was told of George W. Bush going up in Ariel Sharon's helicopter in 1998, two years before he ran for president, and saying of Israel's ten-mile waist, "We have driveways in Texas longer than that."

The anxiety about Obama is that he is so new to the scene that few people have had a chance to get to him. The relationship guy is Lee Rosenberg of Chicago, who introduced Obama. "I can personally attest that Senator Obama is a genuine friend of Israel," he said. In 2006, Obama "fulfilled a pledge he made to the Chicago Jewish community" and

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Shoals, Alabama, or Tacoma, Washington, or Council Bluffs, Iowa? Ladies and gentlemen, the success or failure of the pro-Israel community rests on three words, our personal relationships." And people accused Walt and Mearsheimer of fostering a conspiracy theory.

AIPAC flashes its relationships the way kids trade baseball cards. Bill Kristol said that Hart Hasten, a Holocaust survivor and successful Indianapolis businessman, had been crucial to shaping Dan Quayle's view of Israel, having "spent a lot of time" with Quayle when he was still a congressman. (Quayle's office later told me, "The statement Bill Kristol made was not exactly accurate. Mr. Quayle said his broad knowledge of

visited Israel. And the topper: Obama "has gotten to know" Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister who is against ever dividing Jerusalem. Rosenberg looked pale, drained—as queasily forceful as a mob boss vouching for an unknown family's bona fides.

The good news I can report is the new AIPAC line. In some ways the organization is belligerent: speakers emphasized the need to attack Iran before it gets nukes and to invade Gaza to take on Hamas. But peace is in the air, too, now that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government is working overtime to cut a deal with the Palestinians on the West Bank and with the Syrians for the return of the Golan Heights. AIPAC reflected

this policy. I heard a few conference-goers saying at microphones that the Bible gives Israel a right to the West Bank. But they received only a smattering of applause, and in one instance the moderator said the questioner was using inappropriate language.

The soul of the conference for me was Tal Becker, the highly personable Israeli negotiator. "I see [Palestinian negotiator] Saeb Erekat a lot more than I see my wife and kids," he said, promising that if he and Palestinian moderates fail to reach an agreement, their goal is "to keep talking and keep talking and keep talking."

Yet before you get out your handkerchief, reflect that AIPAC has for more than 30 years promoted the colonization process. In 1975, when President Ford wanted to reassess Mideast policy over Israeli intransigence, he was cut off at the knees by an AIPAC letter signed by 76 senators. Then in 1989, when James Baker went before AIPAC and told them to give up their idea of a Greater Israel including the West Bank, George H.W. Bush received a letter of anger signed by 94 senators. In both instances, AIPAC was hewing to the Israeli government line and nullifying American policymaking.

No, AIPAC's change of heart cannot be ascribed to the good thinking of American Jews. They're not thinking at all. They have passed on their full powers of judgment to the Israeli government. In that sense, the Zionists in that hall might best be compared to Communists of the '30s and '40s, who also abandoned their judgment to a far off authority even as they argued this and that subclause codicil in intense councils. On my train ride back to New York, a little rich kid of about 14, traveling with his uncle in the seat behind me, called his parents to complain that Obama's views on Israel seemed "tailored" and "he's never really stood up for

Israel." Indoctrination, pure and simple.

The great sadness here is that American Jewry is the most educated, most affluent segment of the public. Yet on this issue there is little independent thinking. The obvious question is whether they don't have dual loyalty. As a Jew, I feel uncomfortable using the phrase, given its long history, but the facts are inarguable. Leon Wieseltier of *The New Republic* speaks of everything "we" should do to make peace with the Palestinians, then corrects himself to say what Israel should do. Speaker after speaker says that Israel is in our hearts. People who emigrate to Israel are applauded, and when the national anthems are played, one cantor sings the "Star Spangled Banner," but the "Hatikvah" has two cantors belting it out, with the audience roaring along. Maybe most revealing, I heard a right-wing Israeli politician sharply criticizing Olmert's policy in the West Bank. Think of the scandal it would cause if American politicians went abroad and criticized the president's foreign policy. It's no scandal here because AIPAC is a virtual extension of Israel.

Of course, AIPAC and its roll call of politicians would say that American and Israeli interests are identical. I wonder how those politicians really feel. Their I-love-the-miracle-of-Israel rhetoric is so endless that it creates an undercurrent of doth protest too much—an impression that if there weren't so much money at stake, they would run from Israel with winged heels.

AIPAC takes care to remind the pols of deeper reasons to help the Jews. The Holocaust imagery never stops. And there is a related theme: that Jews are the golden goose of Western society. The very last of the "Zionist Stories" AIPAC showed before Obama and Clinton spoke was of a scientist, IBM's Nissensohn. The piece emphasized Israel's contribution to high-tech industry from

software to desalination, hinting at a traditional Jewish idea: for a society to flourish, it must treat Jews well. Haim Saban's story made the same point. Look what Egypt lost when it forced the Saban family to flee.

The theme of the conference was "The U.S.-Israel Relationship: Built to Last." But that seems another case of protesting too much. AIPAC is beset on many sides.

It surely noticed how much attention Palestinians got this spring for commemorations of the Nakba, their dispossession in 1948 and onwards. AIPAC fought back with its own dispossession narrative. About 700,000 Jews, including Haim Saban, were forced out of Arab societies following the formation of Israel. One of them was novelist Eli Amir, who grew up in privileged Baghdad and was forced into a refugee camp in 1950. Amir appeared live by satellite and berated AIPAC for not highlighting his story before this year.

Another problem for AIPAC is the growing alienation of younger Jews from Israel's hardline policies, especially as those Jews do well here and assimilate. "I worry a lot more about the American Jewish community than I do about Israel—about which I have grave doubts," Wieseltier said.

AIPAC is happy to work with non-Jewish Americans. At one dinner, I sat at the same table with Mark and Carrie Burns, Christian evangelical radio hosts from Illinois. Carrie said that many Christians she knows will vote on Jerusalem being in the hands of the Jews as a litmus issue. Thus AIPAC may hope to replace dwindling elite influence with populist numbers. I wouldn't hold my breath. Carrie said that at a synagogue she addressed, the first question came from a high-school girl who said, "But isn't Israel an apartheid state?"

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# The British Blunder

In attacking my new book, *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War*, Victor Davis Hanson, the court historian of the neoconservatives, charges me with

“rewriting ... facts” and showing “ingratitude” to American and British soldiers who fought World Wars I and II. Both charges are false, and transparently so.

Hanson cites not a single fact I got wrong and ignores the fact that the book is dedicated to my mother’s four brothers, who fought in World War II. Moreover, the book begins by celebrating the greatness of the British nation and heroism of its soldier-sons. Did Hanson even read it?

The focus of *The Unnecessary War* is the colossal blunders by British statesmen that reduced Britain from the greatest empire since Rome into an island dependency of the United States in three decades. It is a cautionary tale, written for America, which is treading the same path Britain trod in the early 20th century.

Hanson agrees that the Versailles Treaty of 1919 was “flawed,” but says Germany had it coming for the harsh peace the Germans imposed on France in 1871 and Russia in 1918.

Certainly, the amputation of Alsace-Lorraine by Bismarck’s Germany was a blunder that engendered French hatred and a passion for revenge. But does Teutonic stupidity in 1871 justify British stupidity in 1919?

In 1918, Germany accepted an armistice on Wilson’s 14 Points, laid down her arms, and surrendered her High Seas Fleet. Yet once disarmed, Germany was subjected to a starvation blockade, denied the right to fish in the Baltic Sea, and saw all her colonies and private property therein confiscated by British, French, and Japanese imperialists, in naked violation of Wilson’s 14 Points. Germans,

Austrians, and Hungarians by the millions were then consigned to Belgium, France, Italy, Serbia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, and Lithuania in violation of the principle of self-determination.

Germany was dismembered, disarmed, saddled with unpayable debt, and forced, under threat of further starvation and invasion, to confess she alone was morally responsible for the war—which was a lie, and the Allies knew it.

Where was Hitler born? “At Versailles,” replied Lady Astor.

As for the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk Germany imposed on Russia in 1918, is Hanson aware that the prison house of nations for which he wails, which was forced to disgorge Finland, the Baltic republics, Poland, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, was ruled by Bolsheviks? Was it a war crime for the Kaiser to break up Lenin’s evil empire? Two years after Brest-Litovsk, Churchill urged Britain to revise Versailles, bring Germany into the Allied fold, and intervene in Russia’s civil war against Lenin and Trotsky.

As for my thesis that the British war guarantee to Poland of March 31, 1939, was the fatal blunder that guaranteed World War II and brought down the British Empire, Hanson is mocking: “Buchanan argues that, had the imperialist Winston Churchill not pushed poor Hitler into a corner, he would have never invaded Poland in 1939, which triggered an unnecessary Allied response.”

First, Hanson should get his prime ministers straight. It was Neville Chamberlain who issued the war guarantee to Poland after the collapse of his Munich Accord.

Churchill was not even in the cabinet.

Second, Hanson implies that I portray Hitler as a misunderstood victim. This is mendacious. Hitler’s foul crimes are fully related.

Third, was it moral for Britain to promise the Poles military aid they could not and did not deliver, thus steeling Polish resolve to resist Hitler and guaranteeing Poland’s annihilation? Was it wise for Britain to declare a world war on the strongest nation in Europe over a town, Danzig, where the British prime minister thought Germany had the stronger claim?

What were the consequences for Poland of trusting in Britain? Crucifixion on a Nazi-Soviet cross, the Katyn massacre of the Polish officer corps, Treblinka and Auschwitz, annihilation of the Home Army, millions of brave Polish dead, half a century of Bolshevik terror.

And how did Churchill honor Britain’s commitment to Poland? During trips to Moscow, Churchill bullied the Polish prime minister into ceding to Stalin that half of his country Stalin had gotten from his devil’s pact with Hitler, and yielded to Stalin’s demand for annexation of the Baltic republics and Bolshevik rule of a dozen nations of Eastern and Central Europe.

Was it worth 50 million dead so Stalin, whose victims, as of Sept. 1, 1939, were 1,000 times Hitler’s, could occupy not only Poland, for which Britain went to war, but all of Christian Europe to the Elbe?

Churchill was right when he told FDR in December 1941 it was “the unnecessary war” and right again in 1948, when he wrote that in Stalin the world now faced “even worse perils” than those of Hitler. So what had it all been for?

Historian Hanson should go back to tutoring undergrads about the Peloponnesian War and Syracuse Expedition. ■