

# Behind the Israel Lobby Controversy

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
on March 10, 2008 by

J. J. Goldberg  
Editor-in-Chief, *The Forward*

I was here four years ago talking about the thesis that I wrote about 12 years ago in the book, *Jewish Power*. My editor picked out the name of the book; I did not. I thought then, and I think now, that it's inflammatory. My purpose was not to advocate or to accuse, but to describe the way that the Jewish organizational world operates within itself, the fights that go on among the different factions and organizations in the Jewish community, and the role that they play in the larger American polity. And the way the Jewish organizations like the United Jewish Appeal or the Anti-Defamation League or the American Jewish Committee coordinate their activities largely unknown to the public but for practical reasons the way in which they work or don't work with Jewish politicians in Washington, with Jewish activists in general organizations, civil rights, civil liberties, environment, and what is their relationship to what you might call "the Jewish public," the six or seven million people out there who happen to be Jewish. My argument was, if I can recap it very quickly, that there is such a thing as a Jewish lobby, there is an entity, a complex network of organizations and individuals that acts in the larger society in the name of the Jewish community. It is fairly effective and gets its way on issues anywhere from the civil rights movement in the '50s and '60s to aid to Israel over the last 30 years, partly by building coalitions, partly by saying things that resonate with the broader public, and partly by using power the way people use power—donating money to political parties, propaganda—the things that organizations do. It is one of the more powerful forces in Washington, not as powerful as the oil lobby, more powerful than the chemical lobby, not as powerful as the Black lobby which is in itself not powerless. There are very many forces working in Washington trying to have influence on the body politic and this is one of them.

It was a very controversial thesis at the time because Jews don't like talking about Jewish power. For the last 2000 years there's been a myth at large, essentially in the Christian world in Europe, that the Jews are some sort of a conspiracy, that they are a powerful force working together against the larger society; that they control finances, that they conspire against Christendom, that they poisoned the wells and created the Black Plague, that they killed God. This is a powerful mysterious entity if you don't understand what's going on. Lenny Bruce has a routine "Yeah. We killed him. It was a party that got out of hand. What did we know?" But the myths have caused untold damage, tremendous suffering, thousands and thousands and, in the last century, millions of deaths of innocent people by enraged mobs and manipulative rulers. The Holocaust we pretty much all know about at this point—six million people mechanically killed by one of the largest industrial powers in the world in the space of six years by a nation, a government, that was out to kill every Jew in the world. That was its goal, that was one of the driving forces in its war plan and it was only the allied victory over Nazi Germany that stopped them from doing that and in the course of it they killed 40 percent of all the Jews in the world—a devastating blow.

But 20 years earlier, during the Russian Revolution was the civil war between the Bolsheviks and the Czarist forces and the Ukrainians who were trying to secede. Both armies massacred Jews. 200,000 Jews died. It was the worst catastrophe in Jewish history in 2,000 and now we hardly even remember it because of what happened 20 years later. In 1648 there was a Ukrainian uprising against Poles who ruled the Ukrainians at the time and 150,000 Jews were killed in two years. This has been going on on and off. Sometimes it was 20 people burned at the stake in the Spanish Inquisition and sometimes it was Jews massacred and expelled from England in the 1100s, from France in the 1200s. So there's a history here of deep fear, anxiety and suspicion. When Jews hear about Jewish power or Jewish lobbying, they tend to hear echoes of those old myths and for many centuries there was no truth to it. Now, there's truth to it. There are organizations that do act in the name of the Jewish community and have an impact. Not as much as anti-Semites imagine, far more than Jews allow themselves to think. I was trying to describe how it works.

There are academic fields of Jewish sociology, people who study how Jews live, how they interact. There are academic departments of Jewish religion, departments of Jewish and Hebrew literature, but there is no professor in this country of Jewish political science. Nobody wants to know how it works and that was the case until September 11, 2001 essentially. I've been under pressure since then to rewrite that book because when I wrote it in 1996 I was describing a system that worked pretty well. It was essentially benign and was fairly successful, and well accepted in the halls of power in Washington, in Cairo, in Moscow, in Rome because most of the parties that it interacted with recognized that its impact is mainly to be good. There would not have been a Civil Rights Act in 1964-65 if it weren't for the 20-year campaign by a consortium of Jewish and African American organizations working together. They formed an alliance, opened an office, and printed the letterhead in 1945, and 20 years later they got the law passed—they changed the law. Immigration quotas were eliminated in 1965 almost entirely due to Jewish lobbying. The definition of Church and State that's accepted now is partly the creation of Jewish lawyers who wanted to gain Jews equal rights and eliminate the requirement that Jewish children stand humiliated, as my parents did as kids, to hear the Lord's Prayer that they can't say.

So, in all these ways it was an effective force. Then came 9/11 and the Bush Administration's response. The war against terrorism which is now understood in much of the world as a war against Islam. Not at all what the Bush administration intended but let's call it benignly incompetence. The war has created a rift between America and the rest of the world so deep that we can't even remember that seven years ago it didn't exist. Seven years ago America had perfect relations with most of the Arab world, most of the Muslim world. America was the honest broker in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and was accepted as such, and now America's name is dirt in much of the world.

The Pew Organization and several others did a poll across Europe of tens of thousands of people to test the mood in Europe, throughout the year in portions and at the end of the year they publish the findings. In 2002 and 2003 there was enormous hostility in Europe towards President Bush. Joschka Fischer, who was then the Foreign Minister of Germany, came to New York in 2003 in the fall to the UN. He met with Charlie Rose and Charlie Rose asked him "Why is Europe so anti-America?" Fischer said, "I'm not anti-American. I don't hate America. I love America. I grew up on Bob Dylan, I'm a rock-and-roll guy. I love your literature, I love the American people. I don't like Bush. I don't like his policies." And that was what the polls showed. Europeans liked America, but didn't like the administration. After the 2004 election the polls have consistently shown a new trend. Europeans will say, "I can't excuse the American people any more. You re-elected him. It's no longer not your fault." And the level of hostility toward

America in the world today is enormous. Now, Americans of many walks of life look at what's become of us and they say, "How could this have happened? How could we have made such a mistake?" And it's not just the war in Iraq, it's the environment which is, as many of you know, by scientific consensus around the world on the verge of catastrophe and the American government is leading in the wrong direction.

Our economy. The national debt, the deficit and the tax structure has been building towards trouble. Merrill Lynch, Goldman Sachs, and Morgan Stanley have issued secret reports over the last five or six years, about what had to change and it didn't. They haven't published them—that the dollar was going to collapse and that oil was going to go through the roof. And nobody can figure out how we got here, what happened to American democracy? Many people came to the conclusion that Israel, working through its lobbyists here, pushed the American government into a war that would never do America any good but would help Israel. This has become so deeply rooted in the public discourse in America that there is now a debate about whether Israel's pressure for a war was the decisive factor or only one of many factors. The debate is not whether this was Israel's fault, but how much you can blame Jews for this. So, if I can describe the last three hundred years of Western history as a steady rise in the acceptance of Jews as equal citizens, as positive members of Western societies, you can draw that chart right up to 2001 and now it's going in the wrong direction. It is now legitimate on university campuses and in mainstream journals, to say the Jewish lobby, which is frequently called the Israel lobby but everybody knows what it means, is a pernicious force that is undermining America's political health.

General Anthony Zinni, who is the commander of the Central Command and the Bush administration's chief negotiator in the Middle East, was on television two years ago saying exactly this. He wrote it in a book. Several CIA officials have published books along these lines. Senators have said it on the floor of the Senate. Ernest Hollings before he retired said, "AIPAC runs this town. You can't open your mouth with the AIPAC Israel lobby," the organization that lobbies for Israel. And I was agonized watching this until about a year ago when I had a conversation with a fellow that I knew vaguely, Uzi Dayan, who's a major general in the Israeli army. He was the deputy chief of staff; he was a candidate for chief of staff but didn't get the job, and Sharon's national security advisor. He visited Washington in January 2002, three months after 9/11 and on the eve of Bush's first anniversary. Bush was about to deliver his first state of the union address, in which he first used the phrase "axis of evil," and people first began to sense that there was possibility of war in Iraq. The debate began and the Bush administration went to the UN flaw and they were pressuring Iraq to accept sanctions and inspections again and there was a whole debate and finally towards the end of February 2003 the Bush administration reluctantly decided that war was unavoidable. So, Uzi Dayan was in Washington in 2002, in January, meeting Condoleezza Rice, and Richard Armitage and Paul Wolfowitz. He said, "How are things going? I haven't been here in a year, I'm hearing a lot of buzz. What is the story about Iraq?" He said, "What is your trigger?" They said, "What's a trigger?" It was military talk. He said, "A trigger is the thing that makes you understand that war is inescapable. It's the thing that makes you decide you have to go to war. What is your trigger?" And Rice said, "Oh. I understand now. We don't need a trigger. The president has already decided." That was Condoleezza Rice to Uzi Dayan, national security advisor-to-national security advisor in January 2002. Dayan went back to Jerusalem and Jerusalem found out that there was going to be a war in Iraq.

Now, America had been pushing this Iraq thing; there were sanctions against Iraq all through the '90s. There were major forces in Washington that were pushing to finish the job that George

Bush, Sr. hadn't finished. Clinton signed several bills passed by Congress during the 1990s, like the Iraqi Liberation Act, to fund counter government forces in Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

The [first] Bush administration had a policy of dual containment. The Iraqis and the Iranians hate each other so much that they cancel each other out. Good. Let them fight it out and ignore them or keep them under wraps with no-fly zones and inspections. During the 1990s the Americans kept checking in with the Israelis, its closest military ally. I've talked to a number of people in the Israeli military intelligence in the last years since I first heard this from Uzi Dayan. The Israeli military intelligence policy was "Saddem is an empty shell. He's harmless. To the extent that he's a danger to us he's a ruthless dictator who believes in nothing, including by the way anti-Zionism." There had been secret negotiations between Israel and Iraq on several occasions going back to 1986. Iraq wanted to trade and they would recognize Israel, Israel would switch sides from Iran to Iraq and stop selling arms to Iran and sell them to Iraq. That broke down. Reagan found out about it and told the Israelis to back off and not talk to Iraq because they're terrible. The last time was in 2000. The last year of the Clinton administration, in the spring of 2000, when they finished their Camp David negotiations with Arafat Iraq was offering "we will take Lebanese Palestinians refugees that nobody can digest—the biggest trouble in the Middle East and resettle them in Iraq if you put in a word in Washington to get off our backs" and then Washington found out and shut the talks down. There were screaming matches between Rabin and Warren Christopher in the early '90s. Rabin told Christopher that they were going to open a channel to Iraq and Christopher, in the King David Hotel over dinner turned purple and starting shouting. Dennis Ross was with him and he and Hamar Rabinovich who was then the Israeli Ambassador to Washington, were chatting with me about this last summer and laughing about that silly fight when Christopher starting screaming.

I'll tell you one more thing: two months after Dayan went home, Sharon came to Washington, and met with Bush. It turns out—I've heard this from two people who were with Sharon, and one person who worked for Colin Powell and with Bush—Sharon was trying to talk Bush out of going to war. If you go into Iraq, you will create chaos, Iraq will implode into three violent factions, the Kurds will declare independence and the bejeezus out of the Turks, the Shiites would ally themselves with Iran which will no longer have its blood enemy, Saddam Hussein, and will be on court as a superpower run by theological nuts. It's a terrible idea. We've been telling you that for ten years. Bush told him essentially to keep his mouth shut. Finally, those were the years of the intifada, of the suicide bombings, of the terrible dissent of the Palestinian-Israeli relationship from negotiations and hope for peace into utter despair and deep, deep unending suspicions.

Now, Israel had been used to fighting with its Arab neighbors for 50 years. We're going on 60 now. It was used to being snubbed, attacked, fighting wars and winning them, losing its people but knowing that some day there was going to be peace because you can't go on like this. And in 2000 something terrible happened, they got close to peace and it didn't happen and people said, "Maybe it's never going to happen." There was a terrible despair in the country. And the Jewish organizations which had been leading the fight for civil rights, for women's rights, for the environment, for disarmament, and for civil liberties since World War II and even before, were now working full time to defend Israel. They disappeared for a number of years. In the late 1990s, actually it really began after the intifada in September 2000, I started hearing from civil rights advocates, from the ACLU, from the Baptist Joint Commission which is a very active lobby on religious rights in Washington—what happened to the Jews? They're not there any more. They won't talk to us any more.

Now, inside the Jewish organizations they would say, “We need Bush. Bush is the only guy who understands how terrible the Arab threat is and anybody who doesn’t understand how terrible the Arab threat is is not our friend.” And Bush doesn’t take opposition. You don’t get into the White House if you come out against him on anything. Never take prisoners. That’s the Bush administration so they can’t go out and oppose him on civil rights or on civil liberties or on the economy even though its members would like it to because it needs access to push for a strong Israeli-American relationship. So, they were seen, around Washington at first and then in the larger activist community, as an extension of the Bush administration.

The funny thing is that the Jews out there—six million American Jews, maybe seven—are still voting Democrat eight-to-one. They’re still a major source of money for the Democratic Party. CNN in ’96 ran a whole series on Why is Hollywood Always Donating to the Democrats? And they came up with all these Mickey Mouse reasons ‘because they act and therefore they’re close to many people’s emotions,’ I don’t know why it is. It’s the same thing as the publishing industry, with the toy industry. You ask any Democratic fundraiser, “Where does your money come from?” It’s Hollywood, its publishing, its parts of Wall Street, its toys, its generic drugs. Because when, forgive me for my language, when gentiles get rich they become more conservative. The only identifiable group in America that as a group you can go to with a lot of money and ask them to give to the liberals, who want to tax them to death, is Jews, partly because they still view themselves as outsiders, as a vulnerable minority. Jewish Republicans—they’re a steady 15 percent of the Jewish population—have been saying since Nixon did well in 1968. The Jewish voting went from ten percent in 1964 to 17 percent. By the way, getting seven percent more than you got four years before from 1964 to 1968, that’s a quarter of a million votes. Nixon won by a half a million. Clinton got 44 percent of the vote and Bush got 39 and Ross Perot got a bunch. While Americans voted for Clinton, 44 percent; Jews voted for Clinton 85 percent. The Jewish vote for the Democrats goes up and down depending on who they like – it can be 60 percent, it can be 90 percent. Forty percent will swing, depending on how nervous they are about the Republicans or how angry they are at the Democrats. That’s a million and a half votes, that’s an election. And most of them are in seven or eight states where most of the Jews are concentrated. They’re almost 20 percent of the vote in New York State. In California they’re seven or eight percent of the vote. They’re four percent of the population, but they’re older, they’re better educated and they’re more likely to vote. Therefore, people who are in office or running for office want to please the Jewish lobby. These you can’t please the Jewish lobby because they’re so afraid they don’t represent the Jews any more. Opposition to the Iraq war among Jewish-Americans was ten percent higher than among Americans at large. The Bush administration is considerably less popular among Jewish voters than Americans at large. It would never have a majority approval. It has always been in the dumps because most Jewish-Americans remain Democrats and especially anti-fundamentalist Republicans.

So the lobby is more and more hollow. It speaks for a constituency that doesn’t even listen, it doesn’t vote the way it’s being urged, it doesn’t agree with the things being said in the news. They agree about Israel, they want Israel to be strong and safe and on that fundamental issue there are even Jews who voted for Bush because he seemed so solid. As I hinted before, the Israelis are beginning to regard his administration as a disaster for Israeli interests because they were so close to a deal and now Arabs increasingly don’t want to talk to them. It used to be the Americans were unpopular to the extent that they identified with Israel. Now the Israelis are losing ground to the extent that they’re identified with the Bush administration. It’s frightening.

The last thing I want to say is that because of this disconnect, you can say somebody is an anti-Semite and it may be entirely groundless but many Jewish people will hear that and they’ll say,

“Oh, my goodness. Then I’d better not touch that person.” Frequently, it’s some extremist who doesn’t like a politician because the politician favors Israeli-Palestinian compromise—which the Israeli government is in favor of, but certain elements of the Jewish right are totally against it and anybody who favors it is an anti-Semite because they want the Jews to die, which they will if they give back the West Bank in the eyes of these extremists. They will write an Op-Ed piece in one of the local Jewish weeklies, somebody will get it mailed to them because they gave to the United Jewish Appeal that year, they’ll flip through the pages, look at the headlines “Barack Obama is an anti-Semite” and say, “Gee, I didn’t know that,” and throw the paper away believing nothing of the world view of the person who wrote the articles, not even knowing who that person is, they just saw the headline. Now, Obama didn’t do anything.

I’m friendly with a Palestinian leader who lived in Chicago across the street from Obama, and liked him. Their families were friendly but my friend always been disappointed because he’s Obama’s so open-minded, so liberal and so bad on the Palestinian issue—he’s just pro-Israel. And yet he’s been called names and he’s struggling to shore up his vote in the Jewish population. In New York, in New Jersey and in California where there is a large population of working-class, traditional, frightened Jews Hillary Clinton wiped the floor there during the primaries. In Illinois, in Missouri, in Georgia, in places where Jews have moved out of the old centers and tend to be more liberal, tend to be more assimilated, belonging to liberal synagogues, or no synagogues, Obama won because he’s seen as more liberal. So, there’s this disconnect and it is a danger both to the Jewish community, and to American liberalism. If you don’t care about liberalism, fine. I have good news for you, but the extent to which the people perceived as speaking for the Jews cannot be reconciled, because anything they hear will frighten them. The Democratic Party remains in trouble, the Jewish lobby remains in trouble and Israel will have a hard time.

Thank you.

[www.lawac.org](http://www.lawac.org)

Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content. The views expressed herein are not endorsed by the Council. The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.