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# The Paranoid View of History Infects Harvard

By Richard L. Cravatts

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**Eric Foner's Give Me Liberty!**

*"I especially love the themes that are raised concerning people outside the elites. The differing conceptions of liberty and freedom are very important for an understanding of US history."*

Leslie V. Tischauer, *Prarie State College*

"Anti-Semitism," wrote Stephen Eric Bronner, author of the engaging book *A Rumor About The Jews*, "is the stupid answer to a serious question: How does history operate behind our backs?" For a wide range of ideological extremists, anti-Semitism is still the stupid answer for why what goes wrong with the world does go wrong. It is a philosophical world view and interpretation of history that creates conspiracies as a way of explaining the unfolding of historical events; it is a pessimistic and frantic outlook, characterized in 1964 by historian Richard Hofstadter as "the paranoid style" of politics, which shifts responsibility from the self to sinister, omnipotent others—typically and historically the Jews.

Long the thought product of cranks and fringe groups, Hofstadter's paranoid style of politics has lately entered the mainstream of what would be considered serious, and respectable academic enterprise. Witness, for instance, the recent article, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" by Harvard Professor Stephen Walt and University of Chicago Professor John Mearsheimer which first appeared, not surprisingly, in the *London Review of Books*, and then was posted in a longer version as a working paper at Harvard's Kennedy School, where Mr. Walt is also the Academic Dean.

What the 83-page screed attempts to do is convince readers that America's support of Israel, both politically and financially, is out of balance with what the authors believe to be benefits derived from this troublesome relationship between the U.S. and the Jewish state. In fact, in the authors' view, Israel was founded on terrorism, is not a military or economic underdog that deserves or needs U.S. assistance, has made us hated internationally by Arab regimes who have their own loathing of Israel and now conflate that animus to include America, and, most recently, has urged on the neoconservative-led Bush administration to go to war against Iraq—all to benefit of Israel and causing serious damage to U.S. national interests.

What troubles observers of this type of scholarship is that, unlike its intellectually flabby predecessors from right-wing hate groups or left wing cranks, this political analysis comes complete with academic respectability and the crests of Harvard and the University of Chicago, a trend that Professor Hofstadter had himself originally found curious. "In fact," he wrote, "the idea of the paranoid style as a force in politics would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were applied only to men with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant."

In the Walt and Mearsheimer worldview, there is a troubling disjoint here, where a nation that they believe is clearly undeserving of support continues to receive it nonetheless, at increasingly generous levels, even when all the many flaws in this largesse seem so glaringly apparent, if only to them. Why, then, does Israel still find sustenance and support from the U.S. despite the many defects Walt and Mearsheimer identify in its political, historical, and military character? The answer is in the title of their piece: it is due to the Israel Lobby, an all powerful, manipulative, and influential group whose effect is seemingly to cause rational leaders in Congress and in the White House to make irrational choices in international policy. And why is this group able to induce this irrational exuberance on the part of the U.S. government in formulating foreign policy? "The explanation lies in the unmatched power of the Israel Lobby," they write. "Were it not for the Lobby's ability to manipulate the American political system, the relationship between Israel and the United States would be far less intimate than it is today."

The characterization of pro-Israel lobbying by organizations and high-placed government officials as "manipulation"—coercive, underhanded actions whose end result would not otherwise honestly, fairly, or reasonably be achieved—this language is the very tone that has drawn such immediate and thunderous denunciation of the piece. And it is a particularly incendiary bit of language when discussing Israel, a Jewish state, for it parallels so invidiously the classic anti-Semitic canards, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that purport to reveal the intention of Jews to furtively rule and dominate the globe. And as happens here, there is the double insult to Jews: first, that they achieve this supposed sway over governments and other people by indirection, betrayal, and stealth; and, second, that in the end they are not only not admired for accomplishing these extraordinary, nearly superhuman feats, but envied and reviled for having supposedly surreptitiously achieved them.

As Hofstadter described it, the paranoid scholar sees the manipulator, in this case the Israel lobby, as an enemy, one with disproportionate and unreasonable influence. "Unlike the rest of us," however, he wrote, "the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history . . . Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through 'managed

news'; he has unlimited funds. . . he is gaining a stranglehold," in this case on the votes of American politicians and policy makers.

Walt and Mearsheimer are nearly in awe with the ruthless precision with which the Israel lobby subordinates Congress to its iron will, having attained what they describe as a "stranglehold on Congress." "The Lobby pursues two broad strategies to promote U.S. support for Israel," the professors write. "First, it wields significant influence in Washington, pressuring both Congress and the Executive branch to support Israel down the line," presumably, they are suggesting, whether or not there is any validity or sound international policy actually involved. They then continue questioning whether American politicians can even vote their own consciences where Israel is concerned, so fearful are they of challenging the pernicious behind-the-scenes policy makers. "Whatever an individual lawmaker or policymaker's own views, the Lobby tries to make supporting Israel the 'smart' political choice," they write, suggesting that members of Congress would choose political expediency and favor Israel's interests rather than voice their true feelings about Israel and protect America's national interest.

Walt and Mearsheimer then reveal a remarkable discovery: that the lobbying organizations actually strive to have Israel's policies accepted by world opinion, that "the Lobby strives to ensure that public discourse about Israel portrays it in a positive light, by repeating myths about Israel and its founding and by publicizing Israel's side in the policy debates of the day." Of course, the smarmy reference to "myths about Israel" would refer to any positive aspects of the history and political evolution of the democratic Jewish State, something than Israel haters—as well as those who never embrace or accept the legitimacy of Israel at all—are fond of criticizing, particularly Israel's defensive military attempts to ward off Arab aggression and equating those actions with the murderous, intentional terrorism of the Intifada.

"The goal [of the Israel Lobby]," they write, "is to prevent critical commentary about Israel from getting a fair hearing in the political arena," a rather remarkable assumption that assumes policy makers are never exposed to the ubiquitous, sometimes venomous, anti-Israel bellowing from the U.S. and international press; NPR; Israel itself; Middle East study centers which foment anti-Israel sentiment and have obsessive reverence for everything Palestinian; university campuses across the country where leftists decry Israel's policies and equate Zionism with Nazism in demonstrations, divestment efforts, speeches, and marches; and even high-visibility UN-sponsored conferences, such as the 2001 event held in Durban, South Africa which degenerated into an anti-Semitic hate fest and perfidiously announced to the world that Zionism was racism.

This huge wave of worldwide, consistent, and oft-repeated anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian sentiment apparently never reaches the consciousness of American policy makers, Walt and Mearsheimer have concluded, because

the omnipotent Israel Lobby has as its goal “to prevent critical commentary about Israel from getting a fair hearing in the political arena,” ‘fair’ presumably meaning for the authors a critical view which would support their own negative preconceived attitudes about Israel. “A candid discussion of U.S-Israeli relations,” such as the one they weave in their paper, “might lead Americans to favor a different policy.”

This pattern, of trying desperately to reveal the machinations of a subversive group or groups to a world of dupes who cannot see as clearly as the paranoid historian can, is consistent with paranoid scholarship and also conspiracist inquiries. In *A Culture of Conspiracy*, for instance, Michael Barkun suggests that "Conspiracism is, first and foremost, an explanation of politics. It purports to locate and identify the true loci of power and thereby illuminate previously hidden decision making. The conspirators, often referred to as a shadow government," in Walt and Mearsheimer's world of intrigue where divided loyalties account for pro-Israel lobbying, "operate a concealed political system behind the visible one, whose functionaries are either ciphers or puppets."

The other characteristic of paranoid scholarship, as is the case here, is that the paranoid historian does not conduct his research in a methodical, objective way, with the primary intention of creating unbiased history and scholarship. He has already preordained the outcome of his research by the slant of his ideology. “The typical procedure of the higher paranoid scholarship,” said Hofstadter, “is to start with . . .defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least of what appear to be facts, and to marshal these facts toward an overwhelming ‘proof’ of the particular conspiracy that is to be established.” This, of course, is the very technique used by Holocaust deniers, who conduct their research and have come to their findings in a manner similar to the way Walt and Mearsheimer come to theirs about the legitimacy of Israel and its role as an American ally and beneficiary.

In his essay “Why Revisionism Isn't,” Gordon McFee seems to echo, in the context of revisionist history, the technique used by the professors of building their case against Israel, namely using facts, myths, and questionable scholarship (including citations from what Harvard law Professor Alan Dershowitz has identified as neo-Nazi websites) to construct their argument. In the same way that the professors begin with the assumption that the Israel Lobby manipulates, unfairly, how policies toward the Jewish state evolve, wrote McFee about deniers, “‘revisionists’ depart from the conclusion that the Holocaust did not occur and work backwards through the facts to adapt them to that preordained conclusion.” “Put another way, they reverse the proper methodology . . . , thus turning the proper historical method of investigation and analysis on its head . . . To put it tritely, ‘revisionists’ revise the facts based on their conclusion.”

Walt and Mearsheimer are clearly unhappy with the continued favorable

treatment Israel receives from America, and want to expose the subterfuge that allows this process continue, despite what they carefully outline as all the reasons it should not. As paranoids, they cannot accept a different view of why that special relationship exists between the U.S. and Israel, namely that it makes good sense geopolitically, that there is broad public support for Israel here, that it is not alone in the world community to behave in ways which can be criticized, and, that, despite its flaws, it has been and will continue to be a strong strategic ally and democratic model in a part of the world surrounded by totalitarian regimes and social chaos.

Holocaust deniers (such as The Institute for Historical Review ‘think tank’ which coincidentally—but not surprisingly—currently features Walt and Mearsheimer’s *London Review* article on its web site) expend boundless intellectual energy creating scholarship to confirm that there was no “Final Solution,” that gas chambers were used merely to delouse prisoners, that only hundreds of thousands of Jews, not millions, were exterminated, and that the Holocaust is overall a hoax perpetrated by Jewish victims to extract sympathy and reparations from the world, because they have begun with the premise, and want to prove with their research, that the Holocaust never happened, even though it is the one of the most documented and pernicious events of contemporary times. For the paranoid, for the conspiracist, it is easier to believe that the Holocaust never actually occurred, and that it was actually a complex, hoax perpetrated and promoted in a world-wide conspiracy of Zionists who somehow enlisted the aid of nations, governments, armies, and non-Zionists everywhere as co-conspirators in this fabulous historical construction.

That is the professors’ scholarly flaw here, too: that in their ambitious effort to uncover some hidden reason for Israel’s support in America, they ignore the obvious: that it may well be that the U.S. props Israel up, protects it from its enemies with money and diplomacy, and values it as a model of democracy in a sea of fanaticism, not because of an invidious, manipulative lobby forcing policy makers to make decisions against America’s interests, but for an opposite, and a more believable reason—because it is the right thing to do and America’s leaders and voters know it is the right thing to do.

All the concern and intrigue engendered in this piece of scholarship show that the obvious, and easy, answers are not the ones the paranoid is likely to accept on face value. He is condemned by his nature to suffer in the labyrinthine schemes he uncovers. “We are all sufferers from history,” Hofstadter concluded, “but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.”

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