

- Enough Is Enough: Justin Raimondo
- Searching for the Next Enemy: Doug Bandow
- The Path to Perdition: Engelhardt/Bacevich
- If Not Now, When?: Orange County Register
- Iran Pressure Grows on Bush: Jim Lobe

Every war when it comes, or before it comes, is represented not as a war but as an act of self-defense against a homicidal maniac.

– George Orwell

[Original](#) [Letters](#) [Blog](#) [Casualties of War](#) [Contact](#) [Donate](#)

Home

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LAST 7 DAYS

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

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Free Newsletter

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May 26, 2006

Enough Is Enough

People have had it up to *here* with The Lobby

Perhaps Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) didn't quite realize what she was getting into when she voted against the **Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006**, so-called, which would cut off all aid to the Palestinians, impose economic sanctions, and make it impossible for any entity, public or private, to operate in Palestine. Or maybe she's just brave.

A liberal Democrat, Rep. McCollum had always been a **strong supporter** of Israel, but on the issue of how to deal with the **democratically elected** Hamas government of the Palestinian Authority, she had real differences with what **Stephen Walt** and **John J. Mearsheimer** call "the Lobby," in their pathbreaking and provocative study of "**The Israel Lobby**," published by Harvard University. In that work, the two professors have this to say about the power of the Lobby over the U.S. Congress:

"The bottom line is that AIPAC, a de facto agent for a foreign government, has a stranglehold on Congress, with the result that U.S. policy towards Israel is not debated there, even though that policy has important consequences for the entire world. In other words, one of the three main branches of the government is firmly committed to supporting Israel. As one former Democratic senator, Ernest Hollings, noted on leaving office, 'you can't have an Israeli policy other than what AIPAC gives you

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around here."

What **AIPAC** had been giving out was that the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006 was a litmus test – either you voted for it, or, as a local AIPAC representative, Amy Rotenberg, **put it** to Bill Harper, Rep. McCollum's chief of staff:

"On behalf of [myself] the Jewish community, AIPAC, and the voters of the Fourth District, Congresswoman McCollum's support for terrorists will not be tolerated."

Rep. McCollum's response to this smear has been exemplary – and indicative of a growing backlash against the Lobby. Her **letter to AIPAC** takes them out to the woodshed and gives them such a thrashing that the sound of it is **reverberating** throughout Washington. Averring that "During my nineteen years serving in elected office, including the past five years as a Member of Congress, never has my name and reputation been maligned or smeared as it was last week by a representative of AIPAC," McCollum goes on to say in a letter to AIPAC President Howard Kohr that "until I receive a formal, written apology from your organization I must inform you that AIPAC representatives are not welcome in my offices or for meetings with my staff."

Ouch!

That Rep. McCollum would take such a stance, shows, I think, that the **power** of the Lobby is waning. With an **espionage investigation** and **upcoming trial** of its chief Washington lobbyist at hand, the Walt-Mearsheimer controversy, and indications of a **growing chasm** between Washington and Tel Aviv over the latter's **arms sales to China** and **covert activities** in the U.S., the power of the Lobby is being openly challenged as never before. What Walt and Mearsheimer describe as the **distortion** of American foreign policy in favor of a foreign power – Israel – has now become a major topic of debate. And how that debate has been conducted shows that the future does not bode well for the Lobby...

The **response** to the Walt-Mearsheimer study, for example, underscores the very point made by the authors: that the motive and purpose of the Lobby is to squelch any debate about U.S. policy in the Middle East, especially as it concerns Israel, and to smear anyone who questions the centrality of the "special relationship" to that policy as an

"anti-Semite." The viciousness and volume of the attacks on Walt and Mearsheimer amply illustrate the contention of the authors: but it is the brazenness of the smears, and their complete lack of any relationship to reality, that is particularly striking. The more moderate of these compared it to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; Christopher Hitchens pronounced the Walt-Mearsheimer thesis "smelly," while the *New York Sun* ran a front page story reporting the "news" that David Duke agreed with it.

On the other hand, the two really memorable responses – because they stand out for their measured reasonableness in a controversy not given to thoughtfulness – came from Tony Judt, in the *New York Times*, and Michael Massing, in the *New York Review of Books* (which also reprints the McCollum letter). The contrast with the critics of the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis could not be more telling. Not that Judt and Massing are uncritical. Massing, in particular, takes issue with much of what Walt and Mearsheimer have to say – particularly about the historical record of Israel's founding, and the moral questions involved. Yet he goes on to make a quite justified criticism when he avers that the documentation for the contention that the Lobby effectively crushes all opposition to Israel in government and the media is remarkably "thin." He then proceeds to do what Walt and Mearsheimer should have done: document the power and reach of the Lobby, particularly in Washington, D.C.

Massing shows how the Lobby, utilizing an effective combination of money, organization, and relentless insistence on absolute fealty to AIPAC's agenda, runs roughshod over anyone so foolish as to oppose it. Money is pumped into the coffers of its sock-puppets:

"AIPAC itself is not a political action committee. Rather, by assessing voting records and public statements, it provides information to such committees, which donate money to candidates; AIPAC helps them to decide who Israel's friends are according to AIPAC's criteria. The Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan group that analyzes political contributions, lists a total of thirty-six pro-Israel PACs, which together contributed \$3.14 million to candidates in the 2004 election cycle. Pro-Israel donors give many millions more. Over the last five years, for instance, Robert Asher, together with his various relatives (a common device used to maximize

contributions), has donated \$148,000, mostly in sums of \$1,000 or \$2,000 to individual candidates.

"A former AIPAC staff member described for me how the system works. A candidate will contact AIPAC and express strong sympathies with Israel. AIPAC will point out that it doesn't endorse candidates but will offer to introduce him to people who do. Someone affiliated with AIPAC will be assigned to the candidate to act as a contact person. Checks for \$500 or \$1,000 from pro-Israel donors will be bundled together and provided to the candidate with a clear indication of the donors' political views."

On the other hand, anyone who so much as questions a single part of its legislative program is targeted for political destruction:

"This year, pro-Israel forces are targeting Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island. A Republican, Chafee has taken a number of positions that run counter to AIPAC's, including a vote against the Syria Accountability Act, which prepared the way for U.S. sanctions against that country. His challenger in the Republican primary, Stephen Laffey, has taken a strong pro-Israel position, and already he has received \$5,000 (the maximum allowed) from the pro-Israel Washington Political Action Committee. In a recent report, the Forward noted that a Providence lawyer and pro-Israel activist named Norman Orodener was preparing to send out a letter to other pro-Israel PACs praising Laffey's lifelong record of support for Israel."

After describing the Lobby's largely successful efforts to cow the Clinton administration, Massing illustrates a point made by Mearsheimer and Walt, that the Lobby serves as the de facto agent of a foreign power:

"Sometimes, the former Clinton official noted, the pressures on U.S. policy come from domestic groups, sometimes they come from Israel, and sometimes they come from Israel using its allies in the U.S. to influence administration policy. When Bibi Netanyahu was premier between 1996 and 1999, the former official recalls, 'he made the implicit threat that he could mobilize allies on the Hill or on the Christian right if President Clinton did not do what he wanted.' Later, at Camp David, 'Barak made a whole lot of calls when he felt he came under too much pressure – calls to

allies in the Jewish community, and to politicians."

The success of the Lobby has been achieved by the careful application of pressure at key points: Congress, the executive branch, and the media. Yet the goals of the Lobby – succinctly summed up by Massing as "a powerful Israel free to occupy the territory it chooses; enfeebled Palestinians; and unquestioning support for Israel by the United States" – have never been supported by the American people. That is why such a tremendous lobbying effort is required, why so much money and political pressure is brought to bear on politicians to make sure they don't deviate one iota from the AIPAC party line. Because once someone – like, say Betty McCollum – gets away with a display of independence, it could turn into the equivalent of a **run** on a bank – there will be no stopping it.

Speaking of the Walt-Mearsheimer study, Tony Judt wrote: "I think this essay, by two 'realist' political scientists with no interest whatsoever in the Palestinians, is a straw in the wind."

And the wind appears to be rising...

NOTES IN THE MARGIN

The current issue of *The American Conservative* (June 5) carries my cover piece, "Out of Iraq, Into Darfur?" Hey, if you don't subscribe to *TAC*, then isn't it time you did? I can't think of a single magazine that devotes more space and attention to the issue of foreign policy from a noninterventionist point of view. And there's no telling if they'll put my piece online in a couple of weeks or not. So, c'mon, get smart: **subscribe!**

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