



The Presidents & the Jews

by Leonard Dinnerstein

Jews hardly registered on the presidential radar screen before 1933, the year Franklin D. Roosevelt entered the White House and Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Today, Jews are entering a golden age in American politics, highlighted by the selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman to run on the Democratic ticket as vice president.

What has induced U.S. presidents to pay increasing attention to Jews and their concerns in the past half century? And how have our modern presidents, from FDR to Bill Clinton, fared on the standard Jewish performance rating scale: "Was he good or bad for the Jews?"

Franklin D. Roosevelt

In the 1930s and 1940s, most American Jews regarded FDR as the most pro-Jewish president in the nation's history. They were right. Steadfastly resisting the pervasive antisemitism of his time, FDR surrounded himself with talented, intellectually stimulating people, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Coming to power at the depth of the American depression, FDR focused on getting the country out of its economic woes by initiating programs designed to speed recovery, provide relief, and reform the existing economic system. To succeed, he sought out and depended on men and women who could deliver the most knowledgeable advice on a particular subject. This was quite a departure from previous presidents, who relied almost always on white upper-middle-class Protestant men to decide matters of importance. FDR appointed as his Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman Cabinet member, who acknowledged that she preferred working with people who had a "*yiddishe kop*" (Jewish brains). Roosevelt also valued the views of Jewish labor leaders Rose Schneiderman, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky, and referred to Isidore Lubin, Labor Bureau chief of statistics, as his "favorite economist." He relied heavily on the counsel of Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis (appointed by Woodrow Wilson in 1916) and Felix Frankfurter, then dean of Harvard Law School. High-level government

officials were instructed to consult with Frankfurter before making recruitment decisions; as a result, Jewish lawyers who faced discrimination in private firms found opportunities in the federal government. The presence of so many Jews in the FDR administration perplexed many Christian Americans. Some speculated that he must have had Jewish ancestors (he did not). Detractors dubbed Roosevelt's social programs the "Jew Deal."

Despite FDR's record on Jewish appointments, he is remembered today as the president who did little to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. It is true that he did little. But he did try. During the war, two of his closest advisors--American Jewish Committee members Judge Samuel Rosenman (who had been New York Governor Roosevelt's chief of staff from 1919-1933) and Boston social worker David Niles--advised the president to avoid the refugee issue. They knew, as FDR did, that antisemitism was rife in the nation, and anything that he might do that smacked of helping Jews would hurt him politically. Nevertheless, Roosevelt decided in 1940, before the U.S. entered World War II, to pursue a quiet course of action. He appointed Henry Field to head the "M" project, a secret effort to resettle refugees at the end of the war. (When Roosevelt died in 1945, his successor, Harry S. Truman, showed no interest in this humanitarian operation, and it was soon aborted.)

In 1942, Roosevelt discussed liberalizing American immigration laws with Vice President Henry Wallace, Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley. Given the mood in Congress and public opinion, they warned, any proposed immigration bill would have the opposite effect--a downward revision of quotas.

At the beginning of 1943, Roosevelt tried a different tactic. He asked Congress for extraordinary executive powers, including the right to control the flow of people and goods into and out of the country. The House of Representatives quickly rejected his request. Most members of Congress thought the president was too powerful already.

FDR believed that the best hope for rescuing Hitler's victims was winning the war as quickly as possible. But in January 1944, when U.S. Secretary of War Henry Morgenthau presented FDR with evidence that America's inaction had, in effect, accelerated the slaughter of Jews, the president established the War Refugee Board, financed it with presidential discretionary funds, and instructed its director, John Pehle, to save as many refugees as possible. When it became clear after the Allied invasion in 1944 that Hitler would be defeated, the WRB pressured the Hungarian and Romanian governments to resist German demands to deliver more Jews for deportation to death camps. As a result of the WRB's efforts, an estimated 200,000 Jews, mostly Hungarians, survived.

When Roosevelt died, a California rabbi eulogized: "the Jewish people lost its best friend." He was right. At a time of intense antisemitism in the United States and Europe, Roosevelt reached out to American Jews--the only major world leader to do so.

Harry S. Truman

Harry Truman deserves credit for supporting the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948--yet, when he became president three years earlier, he was indifferent to the plight of the Jewish displaced persons in Europe and to the creation of a national Jewish homeland in Palestine. It was the intense pressure of ardent Zionists, combined with the demands of other Jewish groups to allow 100,000 Jewish DPs into the United States, that convinced him, however reluctantly, of the potency of these issues. Resentful of Jewish lobbyists, an exasperated Truman told his Cabinet on July 30, 1946: "Jesus Christ couldn't please them when he was here on earth, so how could anyone expect that I would have any luck?" A few weeks later, however, Truman announced that he would send a bill to Congress (which he did the following January) requesting an expansion of immigration quotas so that more homeless refugees might qualify for entry into the United States.

What prompted this apparent change of heart? Politics. Governor Thomas E. Dewey, running for reelection in New York that year, was also the leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1948. He scored political points when he demanded a Jewish state in Palestine and the admittance of 100,000 European refugees into the U.S. Wanting to be elected president in his own right, Truman was unwilling to let Dewey get a leg up on him. He turned to his key advisor, Clark Clifford, who convinced Truman that he could not win without minority support. As a result, Truman became the first world leader to recognize Israeli statehood on May 14, 1948, despite advice to the contrary from his highly respected Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, who warned that support for a Jewish state would incite the Arabs, risk compromising America's oil supply, and possibly give the Soviets an opportunity to expand their sphere of influence into the Middle East.

Although Truman proposed measures to improve the civil rights and quality of life for Jews and other minorities, he failed to use the power of his office to fight hard for their passage in Congress. He appointed far fewer Jews to work with him than had Roosevelt; none of his Cabinet members, Supreme Court appointments, or high-level White House aides, except for holdovers Rosenman and Niles, were Jewish. That is not to say he harbored prejudicial feelings; he simply felt most comfortable with his Missouri "cronies" and former U.S. Senate colleagues. Although contemporaries scoffed, "To err is Truman," Truman's stature rose as the years passed. Today, he is remembered as a gutsy, determined leader who made it plain that "the buck stops here."

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Overall, the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower was good for the Jews, not because of any specific policies he pursued, but because he served in the White House during an era of general prosperity, declining prejudice, and educational opportunity--all of which benefited Jewish Americans. He did not select a Jew to serve on the Supreme Court, but he appointed two of the most liberal justices in the Court's history--Earl Warren and William J. Brennan. The Court's rulings in the late 1950s and 1960s resulted in the

abolition of legal segregation and the prohibition of prayer in the public schools, two decisions applauded by Jews throughout America.

On the negative side, Eisenhower used his office to humiliate Israel. In 1956, after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized and closed the Suez Canal, Israel, aided by Great Britain and France, occupied the waterway. A furious Eisenhower, convinced that this action threatened the balance of power in the Middle East and would open the door to increased Soviet involvement in the region, demanded that the three nations withdraw their troops. Israel had little choice but to accede to Eisenhower's ultimatum--which was delivered with subtle hints that the president might cut off all private American funds to the Jewish state.

Few, if any, Jews were invited into Eisenhower's inner circle. As in Truman's case, there is no indication of either friendliness or antipathy toward Jews; he simply chose not to associate with many of them and was indifferent to their concerns.

John F. Kennedy

During the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy told a meeting of Zionists that "friendship for Israel is not a partisan matter; it is a national commitment." He pledged to renew efforts to secure an Arab-Israeli peace in the Middle East. But Kennedy also thought of himself as "evenhanded," and while American Jews were pleased that he supported Israel, they were displeased that he maintained cordial relations with Nasser of Egypt and that economic and military aid was disbursed to Israel and the Arab nations alike. In the fall of 1963, just before his assassination, Kennedy sensed that he was not doing well with his Jewish constituents and sent Myron Feldman, a senior Jewish staffperson, on a secret mission to Israel. Feldman was authorized to tell Prime Minister Ben-Gurion that the United States would send troops to support Israel if she were attacked by her neighbors--a fact that did not become public knowledge until Feldman revealed it in 1968.

On the domestic front, Kennedy supported aid to public schools, but dragged his feet on civil rights legislation. Not until June 1963, after the world looked aghast at television news photographs of firemen showering African American protesters with hoses and police turning German shepherds loose onto the crowd, did Kennedy finally ask Congress to pass a civil rights bill. Ultimately passed during the Johnson administration in the summer of 1964, the bill outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or gender. This legislation greatly benefited Jewish women, easing their way into law and medical schools, and ultimately into professions virtually closed to them.

Kennedy's record on Jewish appointments, the best since FDR, included Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, who became Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare; and AFL-CIO labor lawyer Arthur Goldberg, who became Secretary of Labor and was later elevated to the Supreme Court. Kennedy's senior staff included Myron ("Mike") Feldman and Richard Goodwin.

Most Jews applauded Kennedy's stated goals, but were disappointed by his lackluster record in domestic affairs. It was only after his assassination on November 22, 1963 that JFK achieved legendary status, perhaps more for his promise than his performance.

Lyndon B. Johnson

A few weeks after Kennedy's death, Lyndon Baines Johnson told an Israeli diplomat, "You have lost a very great friend, but you have found a better one." How right he was. Not only did Johnson continue to provide funds for military and economic aid to Israel, he treated Israel as a true ally. He said nothing publicly when Israel launched a preemptive attack against Egypt on June 5, 1967, even though he disfavored a military response to Nasser's provocations. Moreover, when Israel bombed an American intelligence ship, the *Liberty*, in the Mediterranean Sea on June 8, 1967, both Johnson and his Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, were incredulous and outraged because the ship was clearly marked and Israel's planes had made more than a dozen reconnaissance flights over it the previous day. Nonetheless, Johnson and Rusk accepted Israel's apology that it had been a mistake.

On the domestic scene, Johnson surrounded himself with Jewish advisors, including movie magnate Arthur Krim; Secretary of Labor and later American Ambassador to the United Nations Arthur Goldberg; and Abe Fortas, his old friend from the New Deal days whom he appointed to the Supreme Court after he convinced Goldberg to resign and take the UN post. Johnson's determined stands on social issues, such as fighting poverty, defending civil rights, and easing immigration, pleased the majority of Jews. Most of his domestic programs originated during the Kennedy administration; Johnson, however, possessed the necessary influence and skills to push his legislative proposals through Congress.

So, was Johnson good for the Jews? Yes and no. While he seemed to be their greatest friend in the White House since Roosevelt, his obsession with the war in Vietnam sullied his reputation among Jews and other Americans who regarded his foreign policy as inimical to the moral and economic health of the nation.

Richard M. Nixon

Richard Nixon disliked Jews personally, but he was too shrewd a politician to alienate such a politically significant constituency. Nixon and his Jewish Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, pursued a policy of neutrality in the Middle East, but when, on Yom Kippur 1973, the Arabs launched a surprise attack on Israel and it appeared that the Jewish state might be overwhelmed, Nixon, upon Kissinger's advice, ordered a massive emergency arms airlift to Israel. From a cold war perspective, Kissinger and Nixon feared that, if Israel were defeated, the Soviet Union would emerge as the dominant power in the region. From a political standpoint, an Arab victory would have been a major blow to the Nixon administration and the Republican Party, as the majority of Americans stood solidly behind Israel.

With so many Americans and Congress supporting the right of Israel to exist as an independent state, there was no reason for Nixon to oppose aid to Israel. Nor was there any reason for him to oppose a congressional proposal sponsored by Senator Henry Jackson that linked favorable American trade status to the Soviet Union's treatment of Jews and other minorities. And it is to Nixon's credit that he signed the 1973 Ethnic Studies Heritage Act, which called for the distribution of federal funds in public schools to teach the history and culture of America's minorities. The bill's passage led to the inclusion of Holocaust studies in schools across America.

Was Nixon good or bad for the Jews? Regardless of what one may think of his misdeeds in office or his personal animosity toward the Jewish people, his intervention to save Israel in its greatest hour of need will be remembered with gratitude.

Gerald R. Ford

Gerald R. Ford became president on the day Nixon resigned--August 9, 1974. Having neither a plan nor a vision for the country, Ford did nevertheless perform adequately vis-a-vis the Jews. He supported congressional increases in aid to Israel and promised the Israeli government that the United States would not negotiate with the PLO until that organization recognized Israel's right to exist. He retained Henry Kissinger in his Cabinet and appointed Edward Levi, a great champion of civil liberties and due process, as Attorney General. Levi became the first Jew to hold the post.

On the negative side, only two months after Ford moved into the White House, General George S. Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked that "Jewish influence" in Congress is "so strong you wouldn't believe.... They own, you know, the banks in his country, the newspapers. Just look at where the Jewish money is." Although these words caused alarm within the Jewish community, there is no indication that Ford rebuked the general or asked for his resignation. Brown voiced antisemitic sentiments again two years later, in June 1976, when he told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Jews had too much influence with members of the Congress and that Israel was a "burden" to the United States. Outraged by Brown's remarks, Congresswoman Bella Abzug called on Ford to fire Brown, but she was ignored; he was still chairman of the Joint Chiefs when Carter took office in January 1977.

In retrospect, Ford's presidency was just an interlude. Despite General Brown's outburst, Jews held neither favorable nor unfavorable opinions of him. Their hopes lay with the next administration.

Jimmy Carter

Perhaps Jimmy Carter's most significant accomplishment as president was his persistent efforts to persuade Egypt and Israel to end hostilities and establish diplomatic relations, a process that culminated in the 1978 Camp David peace agreement, for which Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat received the Nobel Peace Prize.

In his choice of appointments, Carter surrounded himself with his "Georgia Mafia," which included Stuart Eisenstadt, a Jew who served as Carter's chief of domestic policies. Carter also appointed as Secretary of Defense Howard Brown, the first Jew to hold that post.

The Carter presidency was marred by high inflation and a botched rescue attempt during the Iran hostage crisis. His administration also seemed to get its signals crossed in a scandal known as the "Andrew Young Affair." In 1979, Young, an African American who served as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., held a secret meeting with PLO representatives at a time when American diplomats were under strict presidential orders not to meet privately with the PLO. When news of the meeting was leaked to the press, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance demanded an explanation. Young lied, denying that the meeting had taken place. As a consequence, Vance forced him to resign. When inaccurate newspaper stories attributed Young's departure to Jewish influence, stirring up resentment toward Jews among African Americans, the Carter administration kept silent. The president's failure to set the record straight--which was not intended to sow discord between Jews and Blacks but to deflect criticism that his administration was in disarray--amounted to casting the Jews as scapegoat.

So was Carter good or bad for the Jews? He deserves high praise for his statesmanship at Camp David, but the Andrew Young Affair diminished his stature in the eyes of many Jews.

Ronald Reagan

Despite Ronald Reagan's support of selling airborne warning and control system aircraft (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia, he regarded Israel as America's most dependable ally in the Middle East. Israel certainly played that role when it served as an intermediary in the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the U.S. secretly channeled arms from Iran to rightwing rebels in Nicaragua. The Pollard affair, in which a Jewish American naval intelligence officer was caught spying for Israel, did not seriously affect relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, Jonathan Pollard's life sentence struck many Jews as excessive.

The episode that caused the greatest upset among American Jews was Reagan's 1985 visit to the Bitburg cemetery in Germany, where he paid tribute to German soldiers, including members of the Waffen SS. Jewish leaders, the American Legion, 53 U.S. senators, and the first lady urged him to cancel his trip, but he refused. At Bitburg, Reagan lost the Jewish community's trust. As reporter Lou Cannon later wrote, Reagan's "decision to hold the ceremony demonstrated a failure of historical understanding."

Was Reagan good or bad for the Jews? Political analyst Steven Hurst put it succinctly: Reagan, he said, had a "visceral emotional attachment to Israel and a corresponding hostility to the Arab states," which gained him the support of many American Jews who opposed his conservative economic agenda.

George H.W. Bush

While there had been a "point man" to whom Jews could go in the Reagan administration, there was no such person in the Bush White House. Bush and his Secretary of State, James A. Baker, were generally viewed by American Jews as unfriendly to Israel. When Baker proposed a peace plan in the Middle East that called for territorial concessions, even Jews who favored a land-for-peace deal were distrustful of Bush's intentions. And while many American Jews objected to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's hard-line policies, they resented Bush's attempts to strong-arm the Israeli government. Not until Yitzhak Rabin and his Labor Party rose to power in June 1992 was Bush willing to release a \$10 billion loan in exchange for Israeli concessions and agreements not to expand Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Bush redeemed himself in the eyes of most American Jews and Israelis when the United States led an alliance of nations to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait and stop SCUD missile attacks on Israeli cities.

In domestic affairs, there is no indication that Bush did anything particularly good or bad for American Jews. Bush's support of federal aid to parochial schools was not looked on with favor by most American Jews, and Bush scored few points when he appointed Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Thomas, a conservative, had little judicial experience, and there was some question about whether he sexually harassed one of his assistants, Anita Hill.

Bill Clinton

From the perspective of forging alliances with Jews, Bill Clinton has been the best U.S. president since Franklin D. Roosevelt. No one has appointed as many Jews to positions of influence. They include his national security advisor Samuel Berger; Cabinet members Robert Rubin in Treasury and Dan Glickman in Agriculture; and Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer. It is fair to say that Clinton's positions on issues such as federal aid to education and extended health care benefits are in line with the values of most Jews. On the other hand, he engaged in inappropriate conduct with Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern young enough to be his daughter. Although Lewinsky is Jewish, the sex scandal did not become a "Jewish" issue.

In the affairs of state, Clinton put his prestige on the line by trying, on several occasions, to broker a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinian leadership. And unlike Bush in the early 1990s, who praised the Arabs and barely contained his contempt for Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Clinton saluted Prime Minister Ehud Barak for his willingness to compromise with Yasser Arafat at Camp David II in order to break the deadlock over Jerusalem's future status.

Was Clinton good for the Jews? The answer is obvious. He appointed Jews to high office, and tried mightily to bring peace to Israel, all the while presiding over an unprecedented period of prosperity in America.

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