

Fresh evidence: U.S. and the Israel lobby

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

John Mearsheimer, an expert in international relations at the University of Chicago, and Stephen Walt, academic dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, have issued what United Press International calls "a searing attack on the role and power of Washington's pro-Israel lobby." Their study, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," argues that Israel played a major role in pushing the U.S. into the war in Iraq, and it concludes that the Israel lobby's influence on U.S. foreign policy is bad both for Israel and for the U.S.

In a lengthy article in the *London Review of Books*, Mearsheimer and Walt identify the Israel lobby as a loose coalition of politicians, Jewish groups, media representatives and evangelical Christians. They examine how the lobby has grown in strength in recent decades.

The word that the lobby has extraordinary political power does not come as a surprise to former Illinois senator Adlai Stevenson III, now retired from politics. As senator from 1970 to 1981, Stevenson was known as an eloquent spokesman for liberal causes. In 1980 he did a rare thing in the U.S. Senate: he confronted the Israel lobby.

There were strong statements of opposition to Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land from the Carter White House and the media early in 1980. In February, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published editorials criticizing Israel for defying President Carter's clear statement that the settlements were "illegal and an obstacle to peace."

In March 1980 Israel defied a United Nations Security Council resolution against the seizure of property and the building of settlements on occupied land. Israel expropriated 1,000 acres from the town of Beit Hanina, a Palestinian suburb adjacent to East Jerusalem.

Gregory Orfalea describes the political dynamics of this period in *The Arab Americans: A History* (Olive Branch Press, 2006). Orfalea, who now directs the Center for Writing at Pitzer College, in Claremont, California, was then working for the National Association of Arab Americans in Washington. He writes that Israel's land seizure posed an "uncomfortable dilemma" for the U.S. State Department because the expropriated land was owned by Palestinian Arabs, many of whom were American citizens who lived in Detroit. Under the Hickenlooper Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, "foreign aid is to be suspended to any country seizing control of American-owned property."

Emboldened by this clear violation of American law, but realizing that there was little chance that Congress would enforce the law against Israel—which at the time was receiving \$3 billion a year from the U.S.—California congressman Pete McCloskey suggested that the U.S. reduce aid to Israel by \$150 million, the amount the State Department estimated as the cost of settlement activity in the occupied territories. That way the U.S. technically would not be giving Israel money in violation of U.S. law.

State Department official Morris Draper came to see McCloskey and "barked him off the rug" with the argument that if McCloskey's resolution was defeated it would "send the wrong signal" to the Israelis, and if it was passed it would "upset the proverbial 'delicate negotiations'" on West Bank autonomy. Caught between not wanting to make the State Department look weak in dealing with Israel and not wanting to upset negotiations which at the time still showed some promise, McCloskey withdrew his amendment.

In June 1980 Edmund Muskie, Carter's new secretary of state, criticized the settlements. The political battle shifted to the Senate, where Stevenson agreed to offer an aid-bill amendment that would reduce Israel's aid funds by \$150 million. In a speech on the Senate floor, he noted that though Israel got half of U.S. foreign-aid money, Israel's prime minister Menachem Begin "blithely, sometimes insultingly" ignored U.S. policy on settlements. Stevenson told his fellow senators that "massive U.S. aid to a truculent Begin government raises some rather large questions of objectivity—not of me, but of the U.S. government."

The amendment was tabled on a vote of 85-7. The six senators who voted with Stevenson were Mark Hatfield (Oregon), Henry Bellmon (Oklahoma), James McClure (Idaho), Jesse Helms (North Carolina), Milton Young (North Dakota) and Robert Byrd

(West Virginia). Only Byrd is still in the Senate. Stevenson's 1980 effort to withhold aid money may well have been the last time any U.S. senator took a critical look at Israel's illegal settlements.

Most of the American media have ignored the Mearsheimer-Walt study. It has been discussed more in Israel. American Jewish leaders have remained quiet, perhaps hoping that no one outside the academy will notice that two distinguished scholars have provided extensive documentation on the power of the Israel lobby, a power that now has seven more senators under its influence than it did in Adlai Stevenson's time.