

What Happens Next – Sunday February 28, 2021

Bioethics, US-Israel Relations, Selling the Museum's Art, and Who is White?

Tevi Troy

Larry Bernstein:

We head on to our next speaker, Tevi Troy, former US Deputy Secretary of Health for George W. Bush. He's going to speak about US-Israeli relations under the Biden administration. Tevi, please go ahead.

Tevi Troy:

Yes, thank you. I'd like to make three points today. Number one is that if you look at the history of infighting in the White House in administrations, it has disproportionately been about Israel. Israel is more often to be involved in infighting than other issues. Number two is that when it comes to Democratic administrations, it's not necessarily a bad thing for US-Israel relations to have infighting. And number three is this can give us some insight into the Biden administration.

If you go back to the beginning of the State of Israel, which happens to coincide with about the beginning of the White House staff. Truman is President when Israel is first created, and Truman is the first president to enter with a full-time White House staff, and this also happens to be the period I cover in my book, *Fight House*, about infighting in the White House. In that very first administration, there was a big fight about the question of whether to recognize Israel. This may sound surprising to us today because we know that there's such a robust relationship between Israel and the United States, but in that administration, it was a real question. And the national security establishment was strongly in favor of not recognizing Israel. They just thought it was a bad bet. The Arabs were much more numerous, and they had standing armies. Israel was a ragtag army. The Arabs had, then as now, a lot more oil than the Israelis did. And it just seemed like it was not the wise decision.

And General George Marshall, who was the Secretary of State was adamantly opposed to recognizing Israel. Truman, if he had just gone along with the prevailing view of the national security establishment, would have not recognized Israel, but he wanted to hear both sides. And Clark Clifford, who at the time was a junior aide in the White House. He later became Secretary of Defense under Johnson, but at the time, he was quite junior. He makes the case in a meeting in the White House, in front of Truman and Marshall, for recognizing Israel. It's a contentious meeting. Marshall doesn't want him there, but Clifford makes the case for Israel. Truman sides with Clifford, and Marshall is so mad that he never again speaks to Clifford or utters his name for the rest of his life. But that said, Israel gets recognized by the US.

If we fast forward a little bit to the Johnson years. This is around the time of the Six-Day War. And again, the national security establishment is largely opposed to Israel and wants the US to be either neutral or worse towards Israel in the lead up to the Six-Day War. But there's a coterie of aides in the White House, some of whom are Jewish but not all, who are advocating for a more pro-Israel stance. Among them are Larry Levinson and Ben Wattenberg. And in fact, at one point, Johnson yells at Levinson, says "You and Wattenberg are Zionist dupes in the White House." That said, their case has merit to Johnson, and Johnson actually softened his position and softens the position vis-a-vis the national security establishment towards Israel. And so again, some infighting in the White House is beneficial to Israel.

And then we go quickly to the Carter Administration, where the two top foreign policy advisers, Zbig Brzezinski, who's the National Security Advisor, and Cy Vance, who is the Secretary of State. They disagree on everything. There are cats and dogs spidering throughout the administration on Soviet relations, on Iran. However, on Israel, they both agree. They don't like Israel. They're very critical of Israel, but there are some people in the administration, including Domestic Policy Advisor Stu Eizenstat and Vice President Walter Mondale, who are more favorably disposed towards Israel. And I think that's helpful to Israel in the development of the agreement with the Egyptians. And obviously, there's the Camp David Accords, and we've now had 40 years of peace, sometimes cold, sometimes hot, but still, peace for this 40-year period between Israel and Egypt and Israel never again had to face a standing army in a war since that the Accord was signed in 1979. So that was a good thing for Israel, for Egypt, for America, and for the world, I would argue.

Now in more recent administrations, both the Clinton and the Obama administration, and you have some of the same people from Clinton and Obama in the Biden administration, there is more unanimity. But the unanimity is generally in opposition to the leader of Israel, who then as now was Benjamin Netanyahu. He was the prime minister in the nineties and then was out for a while, but then he came back and is now the longest serving prime minister in Israeli history.

And the Clinton Administration, I would argue, is more favorably inclined towards Israel, than Obama. There's unanimity if you look at the oral history in the archives. They all said that they thought Netanyahu was a problem. They didn't like Netanyahu. In the Obama administration, I would argue, is even more hostile towards Israel overall and especially hostile towards Netanyahu. The Deputy National Security Advisor, Ben Rhodes, supposedly has a mind-meld with Obama, and Rhodes' nickname inside the White House is Hamas, not necessarily a nickname I would want to embrace myself, but that was his nickname within the White House. And so both those administrations, less disagreements, less infighting, but not necessarily favorable disposition towards at least Israel's leader.

And so now we fast forward to the Biden administration. And again, as I said, some of the same characters are back in this administration, not Rhodes but a number of others. And the question is, how is the Biden's decision going to be disposed towards Israel? I think we saw in the first month when there was a refusal to call Netanyahu a signal from the Biden administration that it's going to be a very different approach than in the previous administration, which is certainly more favorably disposed towards Netanyahu as well as towards Israel. And as we approach trying to figure out what's going to happen, right now we've had general agreement within the Biden administration, not too many leaks, not too much infighting, but on this question of Israel, I think if there is infighting on the issue of Israel, it might actually be beneficial to US-Israel relations rather than something that is a negative. Thank you.