

Bowdlerized Obituary: President George H. W. Bush's 1991-92 Confrontation with Israel

Something is missing

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When George H.W. Bush died on November 30th, America's two self-proclaimed newspapers of record The Washington Post and The New York Times were both quick off the mark in publishing what appeared to be definitive obituaries of the former president and statesman that had clearly been prepared in advance. The obit [by The Times](#) and that by [The Post](#) differed little in substance but they had one curious omission, i.e. President G.H.W. Bush's eighteen month confrontation with Israel and its powerful domestic lobby.

In 1991-1992 President Bush engaged in a series of sharp exchanges with Israel and its American lobby over the issue of \$10 billion in loan guarantees to the Jewish state to pay for the resettlement of Russian Jews, who were beginning to arrive in both Israel and the West in large numbers. Bush correctly assumed that the loans would in fact also subsidize the expansions of illegal settlements on the West Bank and in Gaza, which the U.S. government opposed, so he said "no" to the loans. After a series of increasingly acrimonious exchanges back and forth, Bush, facing election, withdrew his objections and the loans were approved, but he was the only U.S. president since John F. Kennedy to confront the Israel Lobby in any serious way. Kennedy was, of course, assassinated and Bush was defeated for reelection.

Both G.H.W. Bush and many other observers of the campaign and election believed the loss to Bill Clinton in 1992 was at least in part attributable to the actions of Israel and its friends. The conflict between Bush and the Israeli government backed up by the Israel Lobby and a number of congressmen and media outlets began in the spring of 1991. By September, President Bush [refused to approve](#) the loan guarantees as he believed that withholding approval of the money would give the U.S. leverage in peace negotiations with the Arabs that were planned for the end of the year in Madrid. Bush felt that Israeli Prime Minister was not taking the U.S. seriously because he believed that he would get what was wanted from Congress in any event without stopping settlement construction or having to concede anything to the Palestinians. There was also a distinct possibility that the Israelis would not bother to participate in Madrid without some kind of possible financial inducement.

Bush fought hard against the Israeli government and the thousands of American Jews plus their organizations that mobilized against him. Thomas Dine, Executive Director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) [declared that](#) the day when Bush rejected the loan guarantees would prove to be "a day that lives in infamy for the American pro-Israeli community." Sentiment against the president in the Jewish community was so intense that many [prominent American Jews](#) to this day consider any nostalgia towards the man or his presidency to be an expression of anti-Semitism.

Bush did not roll over. He famously called a press conference [in which he said](#):

“We’re up against very strong and effective, sometimes, groups that go up to the Hill. I heard today there were something like a thousand lobbyists on the Hill working the other side of the question. We’ve got one little guy down here doing it...The Constitution charges the president with the conduct of the nation’s foreign policy... There is an attempt by some in Congress to prevent the president from taking steps central to the nation’s security. But too much is at stake for domestic politics to take precedence over peace.”

In October Bush obtained a four-month delay in the loans, a defeat for the Israel Lobby, but the [process dragged on](#) into the following summer. On August 12, 1992, Bush, in trouble with his presidential campaign, finally [approved the guarantees](#), which would enable the Israelis to borrow money at a low interest rate. Ironically, by June 1993, none of the borrowed money had been used and Israeli sources admitted that they have never needed the loans. The entire affair was actually a test of strength against the U.S. government, a competition that the Israelis and their friends had persevered in and won.

None of the tale of the Israeli loans appeared in either obituary. Nor was there any hint that Bush might have lost the election in part because pro-Israel forces [worked actively against him](#). Voting tallies reveal a sharp shift in Jewish votes in swing districts to favor Clinton but the impact of Jewish money into the campaign as well as the anti-Bush media onslaught are inevitably more difficult to assess. *The Times of Israel* [observed that](#) “He made clear the cost of an American president waging a political fight against the vast coalition of pro-Israel lobbying groups. In doing so, he exposed the limits of what the world’s most powerful man can do...” George Herbert Walker Bush certainly believed that he was defeated by the Israeli government and its lobby, and he passed that judgment on to his son George W. who was careful not to anger the Israeli/Jewish constituency.

G.H.W. Bush was not the first American statesman to be on the receiving end of a bowdlerized obituary over the subject of Israel. In February 1995, former Senator William Fulbright was remembered by *The Times* without any reference to his views on the Middle East that had led to his [failure to be reelected](#). As head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Fulbright’s was a powerful voice that could not be ignored. He wrote: “So completely have many of our principal officeholders fallen under Israeli influence that they not only deny today the legitimacy of Palestinian national aspirations, but debate who more passionately opposes a Palestinian state. The lobby can just about tell the president what to do when it comes to Israel.”

In Fulbright’s case, the Lobby launched a media and personal vilification campaign against him when he came up for reelection in 1974. Late in the campaign, they came up with an opposition candidate Dale Bumpers whom they generously funded and Fulbright was defeated. His obituaries in the mainstream media would have the reader believe that none of that had actually happened.

Fulbright was followed a decade later by Senator Charles Percy of Illinois who was targeted by the Israeli Lobby because he had voted to approve the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia. His defeat was [choreographed by the Israel Lobby and wealthy Jews](#) and was henceforth called the [“Percy Factor,”](#) a warning to even the most established politicians never to trifle with Jewish power. Percy died in 2011 and he too received [an obituary](#) from *The New York Times* that ignored [his involvement](#) with the Middle East and the Israel Lobby.

The self-censorship by the media when the topic is Israel is remarkable, nowhere more evident than in the obituaries of leading politicians who had anything at all to do with the Middle East. George H.W. Bush, William Fulbright and Charles Percy all confronted the Israel Lobby because they were patriots aware of the terrible damage it was doing to the actual interests of the United States. In a sense, all three of them enjoyed some success but were eventually defeated by Israel and its friends within the American oligarchy. No other foreign policy lobby, indeed, no other lobby of any sort, has that kind of power in the United States. The obituary of G.H.W. Bush should serve as a warning, recalling a comment [sometimes attributed](#) to Voltaire: "To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize."

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