

[*The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control*, Abraham H. Foxman, Palgrave Macmillan, 256 pages]

In Search of Anti-Semitism

By Michael C. Desch

ABRAHAM FOXMAN, the National Director of the Anti-Defamation League and one of Israel's most ardent proponents in America, has a big problem. Actually, he has three problems. Critics of Israel, both Jewish and gentile, no longer reside exclusively on the fringes of American politics, but are now coalescing in the political center around policymakers and scholars who cannot simply be dismissed as cranks and bigots. Moreover, the connection of American Jews with Israel, particularly those under 35 years of age, is flagging. Finally, the moral and strategic case for Israel has become harder to make.

The challenges of sustaining an uncompromising pro-Israel stance are fully apparent in Foxman's latest book, *The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control*. Ironically, it is now people like Foxman who are no longer in the mainstream in America because they have to embrace extreme positions and employ questionable strategies to silence their critics.

Foxman's first problem is that critical voices about Israel are now heard in the mainstream of American society, and he devotes the bulk of *The Deadliest Lies* to trying to discredit them. He and the ADL were, for example, among the most strident opponents of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's much discussed essay, "The Israel Lobby." *The Deadliest Lies* was released on the same day as their book-length version of the essay, a scholarly work with almost 1,400 footnotes. Yet Foxman's response runs long on mischaracterization—the authors never argue that the Jewish lobby acts as a cabal undermining U.S. foreign policy—

and guilt by association—David Duke's name comes up a number of times—but short on substantive critique. He relies inordinately upon instant criticisms of the original article others cobbled together rather than his own sustained analysis. Using hot language like "bigoted" and "bias" is hardly fair treatment of two distinguished scholars with no history of anti-Jewish animus.

Another target is former President Jimmy Carter, who earned pro-Israel activists' ire by writing a book entitled *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. Foxman is outraged that the former president could compare Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories to the South African white-minority government's oppression of the black majority. But this analogy is widely employed among Israelis themselves in newspapers like *Ha'aretz* and is hardly evidence of anti-Semitism. Moreover, of all that American presidents have done for Israel since Harry Truman recognized it in 1948, Carter's efforts to broker the Camp David peace agreement with Egypt ranks among the most important in terms of enhancing the security of the Jewish state.

The final object of Foxman's wrath is the distinguished New York University historian Tony Judt. His crime, in Foxman's judgment, is that he thinks that the prolonged Israeli occupation of the West Bank has become irreversible, so now only a binational Jewish and Arab state remains as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Certainly, this proposal is controversial, and reasonable people can disagree with it. I do. But Foxman goes way beyond reasoned debate, dismissing Judt as a bigot and an extremist. The charge seems especially ludicrous when one learns that Judt is Jewish, lived in Israel for a time, and even served in the Israel Defense Forces.

The best measure of Foxman's desperation is the lengths he is willing to go to shut down critics of Israel. In an incident much discussed in New York intellectual circles, a private group rented space in the Polish Consulate to host a talk by Judt in October 2006. After numerous phone calls from the ADL and

other Jewish organizations, the Polish Counsel decided to cancel the event. Foxman's implausible account of his own role in the affair makes it sound like the ADL staffers called merely to get directions to the talk. The Polish Counsel, in contrast, characterized the calls as "delicate pressure," an interpretation that is bolstered by Foxman's pointed discussion of Poland's culpability in the Holocaust in *The Deadliest Lies*.

Foxman's uncompromising pro-Israel agenda has thrown his moral compass off kilter. The American Jewish community was divided by the October 2007 effort in the House of Representatives to pass a resolution condemning Turkey's genocide against the Armenians between 1915-18. Foxman opposed this resolution because Turkey is the only Muslim state allied with Israel. He even fired a regional director of the ADL, Andrew Tarsy, after he characterized Foxman's position as "morally indefensible" and endorsed the resolution. The subsequent outcry forced Foxman to rescind his decision.

Consider also Foxman's problems within the American Jewish community. To be sure, over 80 percent of American Jews regard themselves as "pro-Israel," and less than 15 percent express any discomfort in supporting the Jewish state. But a 2007 study of Jewish-American public opinion underwritten by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel," nonetheless concludes that there is "a growing distancing from Israel of American Jews."

Surprisingly, this has less to do with an individual's politics—the greatest level of "alienation" was manifest among younger "right-leaning" Jews—and more to do with age. Diminished support for Israel and willingness to date and marry outside the faith are both substantively and significantly greater among younger American Jews. Indeed, the authors of the report, Stephen M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, link the two, arguing that intermarriage fosters a more "personalized" religious and cultural identity that, in turn, reduces the individual's connection

with the Jewish collective, both here in America and abroad in Israel.

Even the good news in the report—that the overwhelming majority of American Jews remain supportive of the Jewish state—needs qualification: only 28 percent of respondents identified themselves as “pro-Zionist.” Zionism goes beyond mere support for Israel and embraces the notion that Jews can only lead a normal existence in a Jewish state. This lack of support for Zionism leads Cohen and Kelman to conclude, “many American Jews are claiming or reclaiming their identities as proud, equal Diaspora Jews who do not necessarily believe that Israel is the center and America the periphery of global Judaism.” Advocates of assimilation like Philip Weiss, rather than Zionists like Foxman, are much closer to the mainstream among American Jews in this regard, at least in terms of their actual behavior.

But this survey also highlights the two interrelated factors that constitute the remaining hard core of modern collective Jewish identity in America. Eighty-seven percent of American Jews worry that there is either “a great deal” or a “moderate amount” of anti-Semitism in America today. And the overwhelming majority think this will persist or become worse. Paradoxically, they hold such views despite the fact that only 21 percent report experiencing anti-Semitism personally over the last year.

That overwhelming numbers of American Jews are pessimistic about their standing in America today despite rarely experiencing anti-Semitism personally is no doubt related to the second factor: 85 percent agree or strongly agree that “the Holocaust has deeply affected” them. In other words, despite increasing assimilation through intermarriage and overwhelming evidence that most are content to remain in the Diaspora here in America, there remains an existential angst among Jewish Americans that their place in American society remains tenuous. It is such fears that people like Foxman increasingly have to stoke to maintain high levels of support for Israel among American Jews, a strategy clearly employed in one

of his previous books, *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism*.

In *The Deadliest Lies*, Foxman calls the Holocaust “history’s single greatest crime,” ignoring the facts that the Nazis killed far more gentile non-combatants than Jews during World War II and that Stalin’s and Mao’s mass killings far outpaced Hitler’s. One has to wonder whether his unwillingness to call what happened to the Armenians a genocide was also part of an effort to portray Jewish suffering as unique.

Foxman’s final problem is that the case for Israel is no longer as strong as it once was. The threat to Israel’s existence, never as great as many thought, is today clearly manageable. True, Syria still demands that Israel return the Golan Heights. Fundamentalist Iran appears to be pursuing a rudimentary nuclear capability, and its president uses very disturbing rhetoric. And Lebanon remains a failed state that hosts anti-Israeli groups like Hezbollah. But in many other respects, Israel’s security situation is much improved. Israel has durable peace treaties with former adversaries Egypt and Jordan and is even closely allied with Muslim Turkey. The Jewish state also has the most modern military in the region. In the unlikely event that its conventional defense fails, Israel has a robust nuclear deterrent, reportedly as large as that of Britain and France. The argument that Israel needs unquestioning American support to ensure its survival is a much harder sell than it was in the past.

Israel’s behavior is also increasingly difficult to defend morally. There is an overwhelming consensus that the essential foundation of a just and workable Arab-Israeli peace is the establishment of a Palestinian state in most of the occupied territories. One of the key obstacles to this is the Israeli settlements there. Defenders of Israel argue that continuing Palestinian terrorism and rocket attacks from Gaza make further withdrawals from the West Bank risky. Ongoing Palestinian violence against Israel is counter-productive, but Israel’s promises to trade land for peace seem hollow when Jewish settlers establish a perma-

nent presence in what almost everyone agrees should be the future Palestine.

In the past, Israel has captured the moral high ground arguing that it wages war reluctantly and then only with the greatest care for innocent lives. But since Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, this image of “purity of arms” has been tarnished. Suppressing the al-Aksa Intifada, Israeli forces employed massive firepower, which took the lives of four Palestinians for every Israeli life lost, according to the respected Israeli human rights group B’Tselem. Israel’s summer of 2006 war against Lebanon, whatever its initial justification after Hezbollah’s kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, soon became an excessively punitive war that claimed over 1,000 lives.

By the debauched standards of the Middle East, where cruel dictators often use force to suppress opponents, Israel’s behavior is not particularly egregious. But given the claims to extraordinary virtue that Israelis and their American supporters make, revelations of ethnic cleansing in 1948, executions of hundreds of Arab prisoners of war in 1956 and 1967, and the use of human shields and indiscriminate force during the two Intifadas have made the moral case for Israel more difficult to make.

Foxman and other reflexive pro-Israel activists today face an uphill fight among American Jews and the rest of American society. Increasingly, their only hope is to convince Jews that despite their successful integration into American life, their position remains shaky and unqualified support for Israel is essential because it is their “ultimate refuge in time of need.” Thus Foxman and others seek to discredit critics of Israel by distorting their arguments and portraying them as fringe figures. But despite his best efforts to tar dissenters as extremists, it is Foxman and other unqualified supporters of Israel who are outside the mainstream. ■

Michael C. Desch is Robert M. Gates Chair in Intelligence and National Security Decision-making at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University.

PROFILE

Robinson Jeffers: Peace Poet

By Justin Raimondo

A CELEBRATED American bard, hailed by the critics as the bright shining star of the “California poets,” delivers the manuscript of his long awaited book, and his publisher—a major source of much of the nation’s literary cachet—sends a note chirping merrily that “the whole staff is buzzing with anticipation.” That buzz, however, soon turns to a growl as the author’s antiwar views come under their disapproving scrutiny.

Even as editor reassures author “how meaningful and important every word you wrote has been to me,” he is nonetheless “disturbed and terribly worried” about those “frequent damning references” to the president. The book, the editor sadly concludes, “will feed the prejudices of the wrong people, especially those who have tried so hard and so vindictively to discredit him.”

The poet’s work is subjected to severe editing. Entire poems—10 in all—are excised. When the volume is finally published, it bears an extraordinary editorial note averring, “in all fairness to that constantly interdependent relationship, and in all candor,” the publisher “feels compelled to go on record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet in this volume.” The editor’s note concludes with the smug self-assurance of one who knows his reiteration of the conventional wisdom renders him practically unassailable: “Time alone,” he intones, “is the court of last resort in the case of ideas on trial.”

It’s a tale for our times. The persecution of a liberal artist by conservative philistines and ideologues, the author a victim of the Bush cult, right? No? Well, then, it must be the story of some fellow-traveling Dalton Trumbo-like figure out

of the McCarthy era, whose poetry of a slightly pinkish hue got him called on the carpet. Wrong again.

The poet is Robinson Jeffers, poet laureate of the Old Right, whose censored volume of verse, *The Double Axe*, published in 1946, shocked his longtime editors at Random House, where Bennett Cerf would not countenance reference to “the cripple’s power-need of Roosevelt.” In “The Love and the Hate,” a long narrative poem that did pass the censor’s test, Jeffers conjured a dead soldier who comes back to haunt his parents. Incorporating virtually all the political themes of the pre-war conservative opposition, the boy-corpse mourns the present fate of

The decent and loyal people of
America,
Caught by their own loyalty,
fouled, gouged and bled
To feed the power-hunger of politi-
cians and make trick fortunes
For swindlers and collaborators.

Not missing a beat, the poet peers into an ominous yet strangely hopeful future:

For a time’s coming—fairly soon,
you’ll not see it—when the ends
of the earth,
from east and west, one world,
will close on your country
Like the jaws of a trap; but people
will say, be quiet, we
were fooled before. We know
that all governments
Are thugs and liars, let them fight
their own battles; and
the trap is closing, and an angry
spirit
Will go through the camps whisper-
ing mutiny in conscripts’ ears ...

Jeffers’s vatic vision is our present, down to the angry spirit whispering mutiny: his uncanny premonitions elevate his poetry to the realm of prophecy.

Known for his violent, searing imagery, which was usually the instrument of a merciless insight into the tragedy of the human persona—its narcissism, its narrowness, its primordial viciousness—Jeffers’s gaze, as war

approached, was turned on the follies of the “radio parrots,” “the crackpot dreams of Jeanne d’Arc and Hitler,” and “the paralytic Roosevelt”—all phrases cut by the editors of Random House. Delving into Jeffers’s molten rush of imagery, we see the world through the eyes of an intransigent “isolationist” in the midst of the post-war triumphalism. In “Fantasy,” Jeffers jolts his readers—then and now—by juxtaposing the German and American warlords as future objects of obloquy:

Roosevelt, Hitler and Guy Fawkes
Hanged above the garden walks,
While the happy children cheer,
Without hate, without fear,
And new men plot a new war.

That, too, was cut, and yet the rest was no less unforgiving. “Powerful and armed, neutral in the midst of madness, we might have held / the whole world’s balance and stood / Like a mountain in a wind,” wrote Jeffers, shortly before the war began. The craggy-faced poet’s perspective reflected the dominant view among conservatives of the time and also their sense that it was too late to do anything about it: “We were misled and took sides. We have / chosen to share the crime and the punishment.”

The chorus of jeers that rose up from the critics was deafening: “A necrophilic nightmare!” declared *Time* magazine. “His violent, hateful book is a gospel of isolationism carried beyond geography, faith or hope,” scolded the *Library Journal*. The *Milwaukee Journal* concurred: “In this truculent book, Robinson Jeffers ... makes it clear that he feels the human race should be abolished.” His critical reputation shattered on the rocks of the postwar One-World consensus, the poet never regained his former stature. As William Everson wrote in the foreword to the 1977 edition: “Hustled out of decent society with antiseptics and rubber gloves, *The Double Axe* was universally consigned to oblivion, effectively ending Jeffers’ role as a creditable poetic voice during his lifetime.”

It was a long way to fall. In 1932, Jeffers’s visage, seemingly chiseled from

granite cliffs of his beloved California coastline, gazed out from the cover of *Time* magazine. Acclaimed by critics as America's foremost poet, Jeffers's career had taken off after the publication, in 1924, of *Tamar and Other Poems*, which, for *The Nation*'s Mark van Doren, evoked "the beauty and strength which belongs to genius alone," while James Daly in *Poetry*, declared Jeffers "unsurpassed by any other poet writing in English."

The poet's self-published book was republished the next year, by Boni and Liviwright, as *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems*, with two additional long narrative poems of the sort that came to be associated with the Jeffers style. The poet's course was set.

Jeffers had a powerful sense of place: his poems seemed carved out of the flinty solemnity of the northern California shore. As Loren Eisley put it: "The seabeaten coast, the fierce freedom of its hunting hawks, possessed and spoke through him. It was one of the most uncanny and complete relationships between a man and his natural background that I know in literature."

Jeffers's evocations of the Big Sur coastline, with its craggy beauty and eternally gray skies, are today often mistaken for paeans to a simplistic pantheism. Yet the sweeping vistas were but backdrop to searing portraits of the people who inhabited this forbidding country of towering rocks, cold mists, and shrieking hawks. His narratives had about them an air of Greek tragedy, a classical beauty of form and theme that gave expression to Jeffers unique vision of humankind as a tragically flawed creature whose base cleverness contrasted with, and even defiled, the impersonal majesty of the natural world.

Jeffers and his wife Una had come to Carmel in 1914, when it was a veritable wilderness. There the poet apprenticed himself to a stone mason and built a cottage and a two-and-a-half story tower made of boulders brought by horse from a nearby rock quarry and hauled up from the beach with his own hands. Tor House stood low, clinging to the bare

promontory of rock—or "tor"—that meets the sea like the "prow and plunging cutwater" of a ship, as Jeffers put it. Hawk Tower rose high over the waves, gazing out at the limitless horizon. Until his death in 1962, a steady stream of poetic polemics and prophecies sallied forth from the solitude of that stone tower that would delight, scandalize, astonish, and finally anger and alienate.

The politics that horrified the critics in 1946 had been present from the beginning, although they did not offend quite so much in the 1920s, when "Shine, Perishing Republic" saw print:

While this America settles in the
mould of its vulgarity, heavily
thickening
to empire

And protest, only a bubble in the
molten mass, pops and sighs
out, and the
mass hardens,

I sadly smiling remember that the
flower fades to make fruit, the
fruit rots
to make earth.

Out of the mother; and through
the spring exultances, ripeness
and decadence;
and home to the mother.

The organic fate of all republics is empire and inevitable decay: "home to the mother," back to the deep dark earth, whose loamy embrace awaits us all. There is about this poem the clarity of a premonitory dream: "and protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out." How eloquently this speaks to our present helplessness as we resign ourselves to our rulers' imperial delusions and hurtle down the road to yet another war. Yet it is useless to despair, Jeffers counsels:

Life is good, be it stubbornly long
or suddenly
A mortal splendor: meteors are
not needed less than mountains:
shine, perishing republic.

This slide into the abyss is as natural as life itself, which can only end in death. All civilizations, like all human

beings, rise up, flower, and ripen and decay, returning to the earth from whence they sprang. Even the mighty American Empire sinks into over-ripeness and begins to rot. We all go home to the Mother. Still, the stench of it offended Jeffers's nostrils, and he became a bit of a recluse:

But for my children, I would have
them keep their distance from
the thickening
center; corruption
Never has been compulsory, when
the cities lie at the monster's
feet there
are left the mountains."

A sign outside Tor House warned away uninvited guests, and Jeffers regularly turned away would-be acolytes who came to sit at the feet of the poet. He was temperamentally unsuited to the demands of a following and besides, that was a futile path to tread, as the poet pointed out:

And boys, be in nothing so moder-
ate as in love of man, a clever
servant,
insufferable master.
There is the trap that catches
noblest spirits, that caught—
they say—
God, when he walked on earth."

Yet the poet could not avoid the trap himself. Years later—"Watching the blood-red moon droop slowly / into black sea thought burst of dry lightning and distant thunder"—the threat of another world war reared its ugly head in Danzig, where the "sick child" Hitler, on Sept. 19, 1939, was "invoking destruction and wailing at it," and the day was

A poem: but too much
Like one of Jeffers's, crusted with
blood and barbaric omens,
Painful to excess, inhuman as a
hawk's cry.

"The Day is a Poem" appeared in *Be Angry at the Sun*, written in the run-up to war and published in 1941, a volume that provoked an uneasiness in the critics and the literary world in general.