

Obama and the "Jewish Vote"

"Concern in Jerusalem: Obama Is Getting Closer to the Presidency" was the headline on the front page of *Ma'ariv*, an Israeli daily. "Sources in Jerusalem are worried over the erosion in the support for Hillary Clinton who is considered more supportive of Israel," the paper reported after the Iowa caucuses, reflecting the rising sentiment among Israeli officials that Barack Hussein Obama "is not good for the Jews."

The sense of Obama hysteria among many Israelis was evident in a caricature published in *Ma'ariv*, in which Obama is seen painting the White House black. Get it? You can imagine the reaction in Washington if an Arab newspaper published a drawing of Joe Lieberman painting Stars of David on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Not wanting to be accused of "interfering" in U.S. presidential elections, both Israeli officials and heads of American Jewish organizations (a.k.a. "Jewish leaders") have refrained from expressing their concerns over Obama in public. They probably recall the political backlash among Democrats when then-Israeli Ambassador to Washington Yitzhak Rabin made it clear that he wanted to see Nixon beat McGovern in 1972. (Though Nixon doubled his share of the Jewish vote from the measly 17 percent he received four years earlier, McGovern received 65 percent of the Jewish vote.)

This time, there is a danger that the perception that Israel and her supporters were speaking out against Obama—"No, you can't!"—would lead to accusations that "the Jews" were responsible for sabotaging the chances of an African-American winning the White House. At the same time, if Obama does become the first black U.S. president, the earlier kvetching by leading American Jews about Obama could place the Jewish state on the losing side, creating the expectation

that the new White House occupant owes it nothing.

That may explain why some Jewish Democrats who support Israel have jumped on the Obama bandwagon. Hence, Martin Peretz, editor-in-chief of the *New Republic*, assured his readers that "Friends of Israel—and Jews" can "trust Obama." Unfortunately,

many ... are alarmed by e-mails, saying that Obama's middle name is Hussein (true, and so what?), that he is a Muslim and not a Christian (untrue, and so what if it was?), that he took the oath of office as a Senator on the Koran rather than the Bible (utterly untrue and, once again, so what?).

The notion that Jewish voters are waiting for a green light from their "leaders," or for Peretz to stamp the "pro-Israel" label on this or that candidate, is ludicrous. Exit polls suggest that Jewish voters chose Obama or Hillary Clinton based on differences in age and sex. An elderly Jewish woman was more inclined to vote for Hillary, while a young Jewish man was likely to favor Obama. There were no indications that the perceived differences in the two candidates' views on Israel affected the Jewish vote in the primaries.

Among members of the "organized" American-Jewish community, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the concern over Obama stems from the fact that, when it comes to Israel, he is an unknown quantity. Yes, he has made all the "right noises" on Israel. But so did Jimmy Carter before winning the Democratic nomination in 1976, only to adopt a more "evenhanded" approach after taking office.

There have been long and bitter disputes between blacks and Jews on the political left. Against the back-

drop of Jesse Jackson's earlier fights to win the Democratic presidential nomination and Louis Farrakhan's popularity, there is a certain unease among Jews active in Democratic politics, a feeling that young blacks on the left tend to sympathize with Third World people—the Palestinians, for example—and may even harbor latent antisemitic sentiments.

These concerns were expressed indirectly by one Jewish "leader," the head of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Malcolm Hoenlein, who, during a press conference in Jerusalem in early February, referred to the "atmosphere" that surrounded the Obama campaign.

"All the talk about change, but without defining what that change should be, is an opening for all kind of mischief," Hoenlein said. "Of course Obama has plenty of Jewish supporters and there are many Jews around him," he continued. "But there is a legitimate concern over the zeitgeist around the campaign." Hoenlein specifically cited the fact that Obama has criticized Hillary Clinton for voting to include the Iranian Republican Guards on the list of terror organizations.

Hoenlein has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Iraq war and has urged the Bush administration to take military action against Iran. What seems to be worrying him is the prospect that Obama, if elected, could start withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq and negotiating with Iran and Syria, and that such policies are supported by the majority of Democratic voters and the American people—and, ironically, most American Jews. Don't be surprised, then, if Hoenlein and the rest of the neoconservative forces begin marketing Republican presidential candidate John McCain as the "Israeli candidate" who would keep a "Hussein" out of the White House. 

CAMPUS TERROR

At 3:00 P.M. on February 14, I was sitting in the political-science graduate assistants' office in DuSable Hall at Northern Illinois University. Ten of us were chatting, waiting for 3:30 classes.

At 3:10, my friend's cell phone rang. "Joe just called," she said after hanging up, her face ashen and her eyes wide. "He says there are people streaming out of Cole. He sounds scared." She broke off. "If he's messing with me, I'm going to kill him."

DuSable is right behind Cole Hall, so several of us rushed to the windows. Moments later, the assistant chairman of the department rang the office. My friend Geoff answered. A few seconds into the conversation, he waved frantically for us to shut the door, then hung up: "We're supposed to lock ourselves in here until they know what's going on." For the next hour, we waited. The news reports online were conflicting, and our cell phones were barely getting service.

There had been a gunman. One was dead. One was injured. Two were dead. By 3:20, the university had posted a notice online, warning that the shooter was still at large. A little later, news reports announced that he had killed himself. Finally, around 4:20, someone knocked on the office door. "Police," barked a harsh voice.

Geoff opened the door. "Is it safe to leave?"

"Well, I wouldn't say safe," the officer answered, "but head toward the childcare center. Keep your hands in view. Don't go to your cars."

I followed my friends into the hallway. Two officers stood there, holding rifles across their chests. Another, his finger on the trigger of his pistol, was positioned at the top of the staircase. We held our hands out to our sides and trooped down two flights of stairs and out the back doors. The first sound to greet us was the beating of choppers flying overhead. "O my God," said my friend Kevin. I looked in

the direction he was facing. The entire parking lot—and it's a sizeable one—was a sea of flashing blue and red.

Even if we had wanted to get our cars, we couldn't have gone anywhere; the clogged traffic would have kept us from making any tracks. So we walked to a nearby bar, where we knew the news would be aired. The death toll started rising. Two. Then four. Then five. Then, finally, six, including the shooter. Eighteen wounded. We were all receiving frantic phone calls from friends and family. Pacing the parking lot in the cold, I lashed out to my mother over the phone. "Nobody could do anything! These were a bunch of 18-year-olds, stuck in a lecture hall, with nowhere to go! They were like a bunch of sitting ducks, just waiting to die, and there's nothing any of them could do!"

The days since have been surreal. The university is closed for a week, and most students have left campus. Those of us who remain try to stay busy. We clean our apartments; we go grocery shopping; we meet up for dinner or drinks. None of us can focus on our readings or papers. Every now and then, we stop moving, and some kind of curtain seems to lift. In church yesterday morning, a little boy stamped his feet on the wooden pew, and several of us jumped. I can't keep from looking over my shoulder when I head down the long hallway to my apartment.

So what do we do? It is only a matter of time until another man in a trench coat or wearing a ski mask aims his shotgun into a crowd of 18-year-olds. Maybe if some students had been armed, there would have been more deaths amid panicked crossfire. But really, how many are going to conceal and carry? And among those who would, how many will have the presence of mind to pull out their handguns and fire back? I'm guessing not too many. If we don't allow our students to protect themselves, then we must train our faculty and graduate assistants to protect them.

Maybe looser gun laws and better protection won't help. Where there is a will, there is a way. But I never want to feel again like I felt on Thursday. I never want to be locked in an office with nothing but a wooden door between me and a killer with a shotgun and four pistols. Maybe, if I had been carrying my own pistol, I wouldn't have been so afraid. Maybe, if one of the students in that lecture hall had a gun, some of the others would have mustered the courage to fight back.

Logistically speaking, NIU was prepared. Police arrived within seconds of the first 911 call, closely followed by a host of city, county, and state police. Our faculty have been wonderful, opening their homes and offering their time to console students. The outpouring of emotional support and practical advice from the community, churches, and other universities—including Virginia Tech—has been a blessing to us all. And of course, with five weapons, the death toll could have been much higher.

But five students are dead, and I'm scared when I leave my apartment.

—Nicole Kooistra

CROSS KERFUFFLE

If you want know what's wrong with higher education, look no further than Gene Nichol, the recently ousted president of Virginia's College of William and Mary. First, he banished an iconic cross from the chapel in the school's Sir Christopher Wren Building, the oldest continuously operating college building in the United States. Then, he let a traveling porn show stake its tent on campus for the third time. Though Nichol's welcome departure in February incited some protests on campus and prompted a member of the school's board of visitors to resign, the angry alumni who drove him from office may well prove that the university is not quite dead.

Nichol's trouble began in Octo-