



Bret Stephens
“Meet the Israel Lobby”
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Good evening. Thank you for the invitation to speak. And thank you for coming.

I am, as you may know, a graduate of the college of the University of Chicago, class of '95, and this is the first time I've returned to campus in 10 years. As for this room, Soc 122, I think the last time I was here was for a lecture by Professor Seth Bernadette of NYU, on Plato's "Symposium." I remember that lecture mainly because I didn't understand a word of what Prof. Bernadette said. And what left a really indelible mark was that I seemed to be the *only* person in the room who didn't understand a word of it. Anyway, I'm told it was quite brilliant.

What I propose for my remarks tonight is to be less brilliant but more comprehensible: to say the obvious, and to say it clearly.

The cheeky title of my speech is: "Meet the Israel Lobby." I take it all of you understand that I am referring to "*The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*," the recent "working paper" by Professors Steven M. Walt of Harvard and John J. Mearsheimer of this university, which was originally published under the imprint of the Kennedy School of Government. The paper was later disavowed by Harvard, which removed its logo from the paper. I don't know if this is the first time Harvard has taken such a step, but I'm going to guess that it is the first time a tenured professor at The University of Chicago has been so publicly and formally rebuked and discredited by the academic establishment. It shames him and frankly it shames all of us who take pride in being associated, one way or another, with The University of Chicago.

Let's be clear: What Professors Walt and Mearsheimer have produced under the guise of disinterested scholarship is a demagogic, disingenuous, distorted, bigoted, factually inaccurate, analytically flawed and intellectually wretched piece of work. If there's someone here from the *Maroon*, I hope you got that down right.

I take no pleasure in saying this. For one thing, I never imagined that I would return to my alma mater for the purpose of launching a bitter attack against one of its better-known professors.

For another, I am cognizant that by taking the time to rebut him and Mr. Walt, I am, in a sense, paying them homage. By denouncing their work in such vivid language, I am underscoring its importance, if not its actual merit. I am keeping the "controversy" which they have sparked alive. I am offering what they and their boosters and fellow-travelers will take as a kind of demonstration of the power and the effectiveness of the so-called "Israel Lobby" to quash debate. They will use this as confirmation of their thesis

that the “Israel Lobby” uses the allegedly numberless tools at its disposal to suit its own purposes at the expense of American interest and liberal-democratic values. They will transform every argument made against what they have written as a kind of badge testifying to their supposed courage, their willingness to swim against the political tides, their independence of mind. They will summon a network of defenders—some, like Ku Klux Klansman David Duke, nakedly disreputable, but others, like former State Department Chief of Staff Larry Wilkerson, former CIA agent Michael Schuer and former Congressman Paul Findlay, semi-reputable—who will insulate them from the sting of criticism and rebuttal and treat them as authentic American heroes.

But let’s be clear about one thing: It is not the so-called “Israel Lobby” that is quashing debate. On the contrary, it is those of us who are supposedly members of this Lobby who have done the most to bring an obscure academic paper to national and international prominence by engaging it and refuting it on every point. As for Mearsheimer and Walt, they have refused to defend themselves in verbal or written debates, at least in the mainstream press, saying instead that they will only engage in scholarly debate. But this position is untenable, not least because they themselves authorized publication of their paper in *The London Review of Books*, a non-scholarly publication. They also accuse the “Israel Lobby” of enforcing a kind of code of silence when it comes to certain questions about U.S. policy toward Israel. But I am not demanding their silence. I am encouraging their engagement with the arguments that have been made against them. So far, however, the only silence in this debate is theirs.

There’s another reason why it’s important to engage this particular debate, whatever risks we might run in puffing up Walt and Mearsheimer’s reputation and vanity. And it is that the case for Israel and America’s alliance with Israel has not been well-served by reticence. Particularly today, particularly thanks to the Internet and Google, we live in a world not only of readily available information but also readily available misinformation, very little of which goes through the filters of editing and fact-checking. What’s more, this kind of misinformation tends to be both universally available as well as “sticky”—that is, it hangs around in Virtual Space long after it might otherwise have been disproved or forgotten or lost. So a paper like Walt’s and Mearsheimer’s, which perhaps 20 years ago would have been published *in* obscurity and relegated *to* obscurity, is going to be with us for a very long time indeed. And so it’s important that we deal with it now, articulately and minutely and comprehensively, before it becomes another Internet “classic” and reference point for those who would make the case that Israel is an outlaw state and a liability to the United States.

Now let me say something about the place from which I engage this debate. In the Walt-Mearsheimer view of the world, I am probably just a half-step from being Ariel Sharon himself as far as my position in the so-called Israel Lobby is concerned. I am an American Jew whose first job out of the University of Chicago was as an editor at *Commentary*, a neoconservative political magazine that is published by the American Jewish Committee. I later went to work as an op-ed editor for the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal* in New York, where I guess I was one of those “gatekeepers” that Walt and Mearsheimer complain about who help decide which op-eds get published. After that, I worked as an editorial writer for the *Journal* out of Brussels, where I wrote many of the editorials the *Journal* published on Israel and the Middle East. Next I was named the editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, Israel’s longstanding English-language

newspaper. I returned to the Journal and to New York in late 2004 as a member of the editorial board, where I am the author of many, perhaps most, of the paper's editorials on foreign policy. Finally, this week I became the Journal's principal foreign-affairs columnist. My first column, in case you missed it, dealt with a Turkish-German sociologist named Necla Kelek, who has written with *real* courage about the life of German's Turkish community, and particularly the plight of many of its women. I also give about 20 speeches a year, primarily to Jewish groups, from which I derive some ancillary income.

On this basis, I suppose it would be easy to conclude that I'm a minion and a lackey of the Israel Lobby. That was certainly the conclusion of one Karin Farid, who registered his opinion of an op-ed I wrote about the Mearsheimer-Walt paper with the following comment on the Egyptsearch.com Web site. After saying that I had offered "no facts and no evidence to prove the contrary to the [Walt-Mearsheimer] study," Farid goes on to note the following:

"OK: The Wall Street Journal, which sells 1.8 million copies each weekday, is the nation's largest-circulation daily newspaper. It is owned by Dow Jones & CO., Inc. a New York corporation which also publishes 24 other daily newspapers and the weekly financial tabloid Barron's, among other things. The chairman and CEO of Dow Jones is Peter R. Kann, who is a Jew."

And then:

"Bret Stephens is JEWISH.... So far we have a Jew working for a Jewish paper, who was working before in Israel for the J. Post, merely being a 'friend of the Jewish state.' Yeah, sure he is."

Now, Walt and Mearsheimer are a bit more sophisticated than this, and they are at pains to emphasize that not everyone in the Israel lobby is Jewish, and that not every Jew is a member of the Lobby.

Yet there is something disingenuous about that disclaimer. Time and again, Walt and Mearsheimer cite evidence for the reach and extent of specifically Jewish influence in the corridors of American power. For example, they tell us—citing a former Jewish lobbyist—that Congress is overrun with Jewish staff members who "look at certain issues in terms of their Jewishness." They specifically cite three Jewish members of President Clinton's foreign policy staff—Dennis Ross, Aaron Miller and Martin Indyk—as "taking [their] cues from [the] Israeli Prime Minister." They also say that "the lobby's goals [were] also served" by these three. They cite "Jewish philanthropists" who have funded 'Israel Studies' programs on college campuses, the main purpose of which, they say, is not pedagogical but propagandistic.

But put aside the "odor factor" here—that is to say, the conflation of identity with agenda that is one of the characteristic hallmarks of bigotry. The more important point here is that Walt and Mearsheimer, along with the Farid character I mentioned before, fall prey to the same reductive fallacy, which mistakes a common denominator for an animating and decisive impulse.

Thus we learn from Walt and Mearsheimer that the "Israel Lobby" includes the following bedfellows:

- (1) The editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.
- (2) The right-wing American Enterprise Institute and the left-wing Brookings Institution.

- (3) Former Republican Congressman Tom DeLay and Democrat Joe Lieberman
- (4) Bush Administration Ambassador John Bolton and Clinton Administration Ambassador Martin Indyk.

Now, as a member of the Editorial Board of The Wall Street Journal, I find it astonishing to be placed in the same camp as my counterparts at The New York Times, and I can only imagine they feel the same way. The same must go for everyone else who finds himself on the Walt-Mearsheimer list. Support for Israel, like support for civil rights, NATO, the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, neighborly relations with Canada and Mexico, pension protections for the elderly, emergency medical care for all—all of these constitute bedrock American beliefs, which we debate only in regards to particulars, not principle. They are, as I said, among the common denominators of American political belief, part of a national consensus. Now it is admissible to argue that any of these beliefs is wrong. But it is absurd and intellectually unhelpful to lump together the hugely disparate elements that subscribe to any one of them and suggest they constitute a “Lobby” which operates in broad concert and willfully to bend American policy to its purposes.

To make my point even more clearly, let’s postulate the existence of an anti-Israel Lobby, which seeks, by various means, to break the alliance between Israel and the United States, to exert U.S. pressure on Israel to bend to Palestinian and Arab demands, and to adopt friendlier relations with erstwhile American enemies like Syria and Iran. Who would we include in this lobby, next to Mearsheimer and Walt? There is, first, their number one fan David Duke, and only slightly to the left of him characters such as Pat Buchanan, who was, of course, an influential adviser to Presidents Nixon and Reagan. On the left you would need to include influential academics such as Noam Chomsky of MIT and Tony Judt of NYU—both of whom, I hasten to add, are Jewish. In the media, Alexander Cockburn of “The Nation” would be there, as would Scott McConnell of “The American Conservative.” Further afield, the anti-Israel Lobby would find wealthy backers in Saudi Arabia, who are even now channeling vast sums of money to U.S. universities by establishing academic centers and funding professorships. The Saudis, of course, are well-connected to the Bush Family, as was detailed in the book “House of Bush / House of Saud” and by the filmmaker Michael More, another occasional member of the anti-Israel Lobby. Anti-war protestor Cindy Sheehan is there too. As is the Palestinian terrorist group HAMAS, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon. Large segments of the State Department are also in the anti-Israel Lobby, and they too have a media mouthpiece in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. Also known to be hostile to Israel are overseas publications like Le Monde Diplomatique in France, the Guardian, The Independent and The Economist in Britain, Al Jazeera in Qatar, Al Zarfawi in Baghdad, and a surprisingly broad segment of public opinion in Nepal, Thailand and Saipan.

Now, I compose this long and somewhat random list principally for two reasons. First, the idea that the Israel Lobby is this dissent-crushing juggernaut is patently absurd. But more importantly, are Mearsheimer and Walt seriously willing to argue that they stand in the same relation to Duke, Chomsky, Zarfawi and HAMAS as they say I do in relation to Ehud Olmert, Dennis Ross, left-wing Rabbi Michael Lerner and the Board of Americans for Peace Now? If so, I dare say I keep better company than they do.

Part of the problem, I should add here, is that Mearsheimer and Walt rely to some extent on the boastful self-appraisals of AIPAC spokesmen and operators, who for reasons that are both understandable and lamentable, vastly exaggerate the extent of their influence and ability to “get things done.”

Staffers in Congress, Mearsheimer and Walt cite the case of the defeat of Republican Charles Percy of Illinois in the 1984 Senate race to Democrat Paul Simon. Walt and Mearsheimer quote then AIPAC head Thomas Dine as saying: “All the Jews of America, from coast to coast, gathered to oust Percy—and American politicians—those who hold public positions now and those who aspire—got the message.” This is taken as evidence, according to Walt and Mearsheimer, that “AIPAC which is a de facto agent of a foreign government, has a stranglehold on the U.S. Congress.”

It’s no accident that Walt and Mearsheimer quote an AIPAC source to make their case: throughout their tract, the repeatedly rely on quotes from Jews to insulate them from charges of anti-Semitism. Alan Dershowitz, whose stinging rebuttal to Walt and Mearsheimer I commend to your attention, notes this is an example of the ad hominem fallacy “in which the authors rest the soundness of their arguments on the identity of the speaker.” But getting back to Percy, the notion that “Jews from coast to coast” defeated Percy is simply nonsense. As James Zogby of the Arab-American Institute, noted: “AIPAC’s boasts that it ‘beat Percy’ rang hollow, but went unchallenged, and so many observers came to believe that it was the Lobby which had single-handedly ‘brought down the mighty Senator.’ Arab-Americans and their supporters unfortunately have, on too many occasions, played into the hands of AIPAC’s myth-makers by agreeing with their boastful claims, and reinforcing them.”

I have my own experience with this phenomenon, and here I must make admissions that are in some ways painful. The Jerusalem Post that I took over in 2002 was, in many ways, a shadow of its former self, and this was due to many reasons. Our circulation was in decline, our readers were aging and dying, second- and third-generation Israelis preferred Hebrew to English, and Israeli decision makers tended to treat us as a second-string publication. Chiefly, we were read by tourists, diplomats, and online by many American Jews.

On one hot August day in 2003, a colleague and I had the idea of making a “Man of the Year” for our Rosh Hashanah edition. It was basically a gimmick to help inaugurate a redesigned version of the paper. So we casted about for candidates—Jewish candidates, since this was the Jewish New Year—and hit upon the idea of Paul Wolfowitz, in part because of his prominence in that year’s Iraq war, in part because he’d become a Jewish lightning rod as being head of a supposed Likudnik-Neoconservative cabal, in part because our talented Washington correspondent knew him and thought she could get an interview.

In the end, we barely got the Wolfowitz interview, and our gimmick went mostly unnoticed in Israel. But to my surprise, it generated considerable attention from the editors of Counterpunch, a far-left anti-Zionist online publication edited by Alex Cockburn. In a 9-page article by one Norman Madarasz—described as a Canadian philosopher living in Rio—I learned the following: “It remains that the terms of the *Jerusalem Post* award and what it confirms about neocon/Likud machinations must be subjected to the minutest scrutiny,” Madarasz wrote.

“Ultimately, the *Post* article does nothing less than place the policy doctrines of the *American Enterprise Institute*, the neoconservatives' think tank, into layman's words. The AEI has been providing the clearest policy initiatives for the Bush administration...

“What the *Post* homage adds is Israel's specific take on the issue, that is, Likud's take—issues most often downplayed back home in the US, and veiled under spurious accusations of anti-Semitism. Strutting out of the piece into four dimensions is how the Hebrew State is not merely one among many players in the region.”

And here is the best part:

“Stephens' elegy confirms all suspicions that Israel, far from being the US's main ally, is the main player in and through which American foreign policy has been *crafted*. It is dubious whether the term ‘alliance’ is appropriate to describe this tandem, the vector of which leaves from Tel Aviv, heads on to Washington prior to returning in computerized metal explosive form to Baghdad, Damascus, and who knows, Riyadh.”

Wow!

Now who else caught on to our Wolfowitz article? IslamOnline reprinted Madarasz's article in full, and here's the best part. My Wolfowitz nomination is cited by—who else—Walt and Mearsheimer. And Wolfowitz is cited, along with other Jewish-Americans such as Doug Feith, David Wormser and Richard Perle, as the great architects of the Iraq war. “There is little doubt,” Walt and Mearsheimer write, “that Israel and The Lobby were key factors in the decision to go to war.”

Now, much as I would like to take credit as a power behind Bush's throne, the brain in his head and the tongue in his mouth, I cannot. There is no doubt that the boastfulness of some self-serving AIPAC officials have helped Walt and Mearsheimer to make their preposterous case.

But the larger factor is the willful credulity, the desire to believe that this thing called a Jewish Lobby not only exists but has spread its tentacles incredibly wide, that explains Walt and Mearsheimer's willingness to grasp at the most tentative, equivocal, inconclusive and readily disproved evidence to make their ambitious case. Coming from a Norman Madarasz or a David Duke, you expect this. Coming from Steven Walt of Harvard and John Mearsheimer, you expect something better.

I want to say a word here about the question of anti-Semitism. It is certainly true that accusations of anti-Semitism need to be put with extreme caution. It is equally true that demonstrable anti-Semites such as Pat Buchanan, David Duke, the people who bring you IslamOnline are reliably the people who preemptively and illogically defend themselves against charges of anti-Semitism by claiming that anyone who criticizes Israel is sure to be tagged as an anti-Semite. Walt and Mearsheimer mount that very same defense: “No discussion of The Lobby,” they write, “would be complete without an examination of one of its most powerful weapons: the charge of anti-Semitism. Anyone who criticizes Israel's actions or argues that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over U.S. Middle Eastern Policy stands a good chance of being labeled an anti-Semite... It's a very effective tactic: anti-Semitism is something no one wants to be accused of.”

In actual fact, accusations of anti-Semitism are leveled very rarely at critics of Israel, not least because many of Israel's frequent critics belong, in Walt and Mearsheimer's insidious typology, to “The Israel Lobby.” Curiously, then, in a paper that offers readers no less than 211 footnotes, Walt and Mearsheimer fail to produce a single

example of a critic of Israel being labeled an anti-Semite by a member of “The Israel Lobby.”

But the accusation is also illogical, or at least meaningless. Since surely some, if not most of those who postulate a vast conspiracy, underwritten and undergirded by American Jews, to subvert the interests of the United States on behalf of Israel, are, in fact, anti-Semitic. In other words, while the charge of anti-Semitism is grave, that doesn't mean it is never true. And here we need to be familiar, as Walt and Mearsheimer pretend not to be, with the classic tropes of the anti-Semite.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. In 1941, an American hero and well-known anti-Semite and Nazi sympathizer named Charles Lindbergh, toured the U.S. warning against “Jewish war agitators” who were driving the country to war.

“Instead of agitating for war,” Lindbergh told an audience in Des Moines, “The Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be among the first to feel its consequences... A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention, but the majority still do not. Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.”

Now, note how both Lindbergh and Walt-Mearsheimer offer some exculpatory reference to the handful of good Jews who either opposed entry into WWII or oppose Israel and U.S. policy towards it. The tactic is as classic as it is shopworn and transparent. Next consider the case Walt and Mearsheimer make against the Israel Lobby. They say it was a decisive, distortive and subversive influence on U.S. policy. They say it “influences Congress” to the point that “Israel is virtually immune from criticism.” They say it has “significant leverage over the Executive Branch.” One of their chapters is actually titled “Manipulating The Media.” The Lobby also “polices academia” and acts as a “great silencer.” They say the “tail wags the dog.” They argue that the lobby all but single handedly drove America to war in Iraq and is now doing likewise against Iran. And, as Eliot Cohen of Johns Hopkins pointed out in *The Washington Post*, “Oddly these International Relations Realists—who in their more normal academic lives declare that state interests determine policy, and domestic politics matters little—have discovered the one case in which domestic politics has for decades determined the policy of the world's greatest state.”

In the case of Walt and Mearsheimer, the anti-Semitic suggestions don't stop there. The authors are at pains to depict Israel as a morally defective, undemocratic, habitually aggressive state, going back not only to 1967 and the occupation of the territories, but all the way back to 1948.

Now I do not have the time to go into the historical record, but I would recommend that all of you read Benny Morris' article on Walt and Mearsheimer in the recent issue of *The New Republic*. Morris' indictment is especially important for 2 reasons. First, he is a “revisionist” Israeli historian who has been ferociously criticized from the right. Second, Walt and Mearsheimer repeatedly cite his works as authoritative. Yet Morris concluded that:

“Their work is a travesty of the history that I have studied and written for the past two decades. Their work is riddled with shoddiness and defiled by mendacity. Were “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” an actual person, I would have to say that he did not have a single honest bone in his body.”

Among Morris' charges is that Walt and Mearsheimer routinely distort the historical record, quote Israeli leaders selectively and incompletely so as to turn their meaning on its head, and ignore the fact that Arab and Palestinian designs against Israel have been annihilationist from the beginning. It's powerful reading.

The broader point here is that Walt and Mearsheimer paint a picture of Israel that, when not actually false and misleading, utterly ignores the context of why and how Israel acted as it did. Thus Israel, the country that accepted the U.N. Partition Plan in 1947—the Arabs unanimously rejected it—becomes in their reading the country that rejected the partition. It goes on and on, including the certifiably discredited calumny that Israel massacred Egyptian POWs in 1967 (certifiable because their source, Israeli journalist Gabi Bron, contradicts their claim), and culminates in the appalling suggestion that the IDF killed civilians indiscriminately and en masse during the latest intifada. The reverse is true, as shown by the exposure of the Jewish massacre hoax, the comparative ratios of Israeli to Palestinian women killed, and the fact that the murder of civilians has been the modus operandi of Palestinian groups like HAMAS, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigades.

Put simply, Mearsheimer and Walt have constructed not only a portrait of Israel that is false and misleading. They have painted the portrait of a demon, with no serious attempt to weigh countervailing evidence.

So we put this together and here's what we have: Israel as a rogue state and the Israel Lobby as a sinister, disloyal manipulator that controls the levers of the media, the financial system, and the government to get the American colossus to do its bidding and fight its wars. I'll leave it to you to decide if this adds up to anti-Semitism. I've drawn my own conclusions.

I want to conclude by circling back to a topic I hinted at at the beginning. According to Walt and Mearsheimer, I am a spoke in the wheel of the Israel Lobby, as is the institution I work for, as are the set of beliefs I hold dear. Let me offer another definition. I am a journalist—an American journalist, yes, and a Jew, and a friend of Israel. As a journalist, I have narrowly missed being killed in a suicide bombing, and as a journalist, I have seen my employees maimed in suicide bombings. As a journalist, I have interviewed the leadership of HAMAS in Gaza, and Hezbollah in Beirut. I have gone into the Syrian hinterland for the sake of a story, as well as the hinterlands of Pakistan. My credibility is essential to what I do, as is my independence, my sense of fair play, my belief that my job is about getting the facts right and approximating the truth as best as I know how. Much of this I learned at the University of Chicago. And so, as a journalist speaking to an audience of scholars, I want to ask you one question: Is your remit the same as mine?

Thank you.