The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy: Roundtable Review

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the Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy by Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer is an important publication for two reasons: first, for what it says about the structure and purpose of an important actor in the making of American Middle East policy, and second, for the understandable—if to my mind exaggerated—concerns it arouses that Israel, indeed Jews everywhere, could be blamed for the calamity surrounding the American debacle in Iraq in a way reminiscent of anti-Semitism in the West from time immemorial. I therefore propose first to review the book itself, then to turn to the controversy surrounding the volume, a subject that deserves consideration in its own right.

I. The Book Itself

The book is important for what it says because so little has been written about the Israel Lobby, or indeed any ethnic lobby at all in the United States, that a book of this level of sophistication can make a field of study for a generation to come. Ten years ago, when I was researching Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy (Harvard University Press, 2000), I was surprised at how little attention the subject of ethnic group influence on U.S. foreign policy had received. A fundamental reason, I think, was that during the Cold War most ethnic groups quite successfully merged their concerns for their ancestral homelands with the greater national struggle against international communism. Whether their political identities were not only American but also Cuban or Polish, Czech, or Lithuanian, whether Jewish, Greek, or Armenian, national and foreign loyalties nicely coincided. (The sole important exception was African Americans, for most of whom the struggle for majority rule in Africa and in opposition to the war in Southeast Asia took precedence over containing, and ultimately bringing down, the Soviet Union.) Moreover, realism, the guiding framework for understanding world affairs during the Cold War, tended to ignore domestic sources of foreign policy in favor of examining the international environment. As a result, earlier periods were long forgotten, such as the run-up to World War I, or the aftermath in the struggle over whether this country would join the League of Nations, when many German and Irish Americans supported neutrality for the sake of their kinfolk abroad. Hence, before the early 1990s, the study of ethnic politics with respect to foreign policy appeared to be relatively unimportant. I recall the surprise of some colleagues that I should address such a seemingly trivial issue when I began work on it in the mid-1990s.

But as I felt at the time, with the end of the Cold War, ethnic concerns could not blend in quite so easily with the national interest as before. More, given America’s lone superpower status, ethnic groups could hope that Washington would increase its support for their causes. Armenian Americans, for example, were able to get substantial subsidies for their newly independent homeland from the Congress and to involve themselves in American relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan in ways that they reckoned could help Armenia. In his electioneering, Bill Clinton sensed the possibilities, addressing Irish Americans with respect to the festering problems of Northern Ireland, and East European Americans
anxious to see that their kinfolk abroad be brought under NATO's protection. My guess is that the best single explanation of the return of white Catholic voters to the Democratic Party in 1992 and 1996 after having voted more for the Republicans since 1980 had to do with the appeal of Clinton's foreign policy platform to American Catholics of Irish, Czech, and Polish descent (among others). Clinton also gave in to African American demand that he restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in Haiti, and he enthusiastically endorsed the Oslo Peace Process begun under his predecessor George H.W. Bush with the support of many American Jews. During the 1992 election cycle, Asian Americans (Chinese and Taiwanese especially) became involved for the first time in debating foreign policy in ethnic terms, although with the financial scandals that broke out with respect to their contacts with the Democratic Party, they were soon to retreat from the scene. By contrast, South Asian Americans (those of Pakistani descent opposed to those of Indian, to be sure) became more active than ever both at the state and the national level.

However, it was not only America’s triumph over the Soviet Union that meant that ethnic groups were emboldened to act on behalf of their ancestral kinfolks with a directness unprecedented in the annals of U.S. foreign policy. The rise of multiculturalism since the 1960s, a domestic development dependent far more on the Civil Rights Movement than on world affairs, was basic to the self-confidence of many ethnic activists that they could represent their foreign attachments without being overly concerned with how they might affect American national interests. Consider, for example, multiculturalist arguments such as those made by Michael Walzer writing in 1992 that, “in the case of hyphenated Americans, it doesn’t matter whether the first or the second name is dominant...an ethnic American is someone who in principle, lives his spiritual life as he chooses, on either side of the hyphen.” Indeed, many ethnics began to speak frankly of the United States as their “host country,” whereas the “homeland,” or for some their “diaspora,” was acknowledged as where their primary political loyalties lay.

Confirmed by both international and domestic trends, the 1990s was, in short, the ethnic group moment. Nevertheless, not much was made of this in academic circles so far as the nation’s foreign policy was involved. Part of the reason lay in the reluctance of any special interest group, ethnic or otherwise, to make its business public knowledge. Part of it was due to the difficulty inherent in getting a handle on so many diverse movements. And part of the problem reflected the fragmentation of the study of domestic American politics so that a holistic view of interest groups, parties, Congress and the presidency was becoming increasingly difficult to write. To be sure, the Israel Lobby (or “lobbies” if one prefers) was generally agreed not only to be the strongest of the ethnic lobbies but one of the strongest lobbies at work in Washington of any kind at all. Still, there were difficulties plaguing scholarship on the matter that were general to the field, not simply those specific to the study of AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, and their companions including Christian Zionists that can be grouped together as the Israel Lobby. And so it was with the Cuban, Armenian, Greek, African, Irish, Polish, Czech, Baltic, Indian,

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Pakistan, and Taiwanese Americans focused on world affairs as well. They seemed to be little fish with lots of bones, so better work on other matters. Except, to repeat, for the Israel Lobby. Many knowledgeable observers in the late 1990s told me that this was the thousand pound gorilla in the room and even saluted my “courage” in trying to lay out the character of ethnic politicking with all the emotion this could arouse.

Here then is an important reason to salute the publication of the Walt and Mearsheimer volume. Not only is it by far the best study of the Israel Lobby published to date, it is in fact the best study of any ethnic lobby yet to appear. We might hope that it will serve as a model to stimulate students and scholars to analyze the myriad other ethnic or ethno-religious groups now active in domestic politics even if there will remain general agreement that none of these other groups comes close to matching the power of the Israel Lobby. It may sensitize us as well to the range of groups usually referred to as “the domestic sources of U.S. foreign policy,” revitalizing holistic studies relating civic actors to political parties and these in turn to the leading institutions of national government. In a period when the study of American politics so often hinges on methodological sophistication best practiced on narrow issues, we may here welcome the example of a major domestic force in American politics analyzed in a broad framework.

The accomplishment is noteworthy. Walt and Mearsheimer describe in better detail the structure of the Israel Lobby than any of their predecessors (chapter 4), analyze holistically the lobby’s relationship to the public discourse, political parties, Congress, and the Presidency (chapters 5 and 6), point to the Lobby’s influence on five current major Middle East problems (the Palestinians, the invasion of Iraq, U.S. relations with Syria and Iran, and the U.S. reaction to the Israeli attack on Lebanon in the summer of 2006 (chapters 7-11), and present their case for feeling that the Lobby has been a starkly negative influence on the American national interest since the end of the Cold War if not earlier (chapters 1-3 and the Conclusion). In a word, the book is a tour de force, bearing witness to the vigor of the American political science community at a moment when the nation is in crisis wondering how our foreign policy came to such a parlous state and what might be done about it.

II. The Book’s Reception

So why the well-nigh universal dismissal of this book by the American foreign policy cognescenti? Why has a controversy grown up around its publication that is almost as interesting as the book itself? Here is my second theme: the inherently dangerous tinderbox of anti-Semitism that could be lit if the disastrous invasion of Iraq, and the collateral failures of American policy throughout the Middle East, could, to put it baldly, “be pinned on the Jews.” This concern, I believe, is a main reason the book’s reception has been so negative.

The concern is legitimate. We must consider the historical moment at which this book appears. There is wide agreement that the decision to invade Iraq in March 2003 will likely appear in historical retrospect as the greatest mistake in the history of our country’s
foreign policy to date, with more unsettling repercussions the globe around—and not just from the Middle East—probable as time goes by. Both Russia and China are stirring in response to American reversals. Hostility to the United States grows apace throughout the Muslim world with the possibility of regimes once friendly to Washington either collapsing or changing direction. At home the menace of an “imperial presidency” compounded by manifold economic difficulties can be tied directly to this calamitous policy. Who, then, is to blame?

Not surprisingly, recriminations are coming from every side. The former head of the Central Intelligence Agency blames the vice president, who returns the charge. The press is in turmoil at how badly many of our leading reporters and their editors handled the information they provided the public, especially on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), during the run-up to the invasion. The left sees the hand of corporate interests. The military (and just about everyone else) is pointing the finger at Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for Pentagon manipulation of intelligence and the mistakes in the occupation of Baghdad; torture outrages continue to surface; and the possibility of an increasingly powerful executive multiply, whoever is in office. Were all this not quite enough, the fears grow that worse may still be to come, with another, more deadly terrorist attack, an American or Israeli strike against Iran, a blow-up in Pakistan, or the regionalization of the Iraqi civil war as Turkey, for example, becomes involved.

Who, then, are the guilty parties that got us in to this nightmare? My own contribution to the debate has been to be something of a whistleblower with respect to academic discourse. In A Pact with the Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise (Routledge, 2007), I look at the intellectual origins of the Bush Doctrine. What I find was that the framework for national policy announced in 2002 had been mightily contributed to by a group of left-center academics mainly at Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, and Yale whom I call the “neoliberals.” Not that I leave the neoconservatives off the hook, to be sure, but I conclude that essential elements of the Bush Doctrine depended for their emotional resonance on intellectual substance provided by a group quite distinct from the neocons in the Republican Party.

The point of bringing this up is to report as no surprise that many of the neoliberals criticized in my book are quite irate that anyone should suggest they have any responsibility whatsoever for the terms of the Bush Doctrine and hence for the widespread support in intellectual circles in 2002 for the invasion of Iraq. So too, and with much more understandable anger and far more clout than my bevy of Ivy League professors and a few collaborating journalist like Thomas Friedman, those in the Israel Lobby criticized by Walt and Mearsheimer are appalled that they are said to have some accounting to do for their political activism in the decision to go to war. Others outside the Lobby are in agreement. Hence the heavy volleys of criticism the book has received.

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The controversy over the book has become as interesting as the book itself. One possibility, of course, is that the Israel Lobby is so powerful that it has generated a hostile reaction to Walt and Mearsheimer’s book, a knee jerk response to an attack on a sacred cow, the inevitable result when a taboo is broken. In a word, the negative critiques of the book (to date, I have not seen a single one in the United States in a prominent publication that could be called positive) illustrate just the charge that the book makes in chapter 6 on the way public discourse has been possessed by a form of thinking that gives a blank American check to whatever it is Israel decides to do. I believe this is in fact part of what has occurred: the Lobby has called in its chips. It has done so before (most recently with respect to Jimmy Carter) and now again. You either attack the book and are in its good graces, or you do not and the heavens may fall. Still, I believe that the reasons for what on balance has most certainly been a bad press for the book are more complicated.

What grounds does the book give to alarm many that it may contribute to anti-Semitism? So many reviews have appeared at this point, with such a wide range of arguments mooted, that I will make no effort to cover them. Instead, I would like to suggest five “tests,” or questions, that might be applied to the volume to see on what grounds such a criticism might be made to stick.

First, do Walt and Mearsheimer use their evidence to de-legitimize the Israeli state? That is, do they accuse it of such manifold wrongdoings that we are to understand that it should be ranked a pariah state, a rogue country that we should boycott, disinvest from, and in general denounce as apartheid South Africa was once attacked or as Myanmar/Burma is treated today? Sometimes this charge is put as the “double standard” criterion: is Israel being held up to a higher code of conduct than other countries, found wanting, and implicitly if not explicitly de-legitimized as a sovereign state while other countries, with equal or far worse records, are accorded international recognition?

Here Walt and Mearsheimer are clear. Although they criticize at length the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, both in terms of their account of Zionist hopes in the 1930s to achieve what today would be called “ethnic cleansing” and with respect to the current treatment of the subject Arab population, they do not use their evidence to suggest that as a result Israel represents some kind of especially objectionable form of government. They salute Israel’s many accomplishments and they assert more than once that should the survival of the Jewish state genuinely be at risk, then the United States should come to its defense. As for the ugly truths, well, what country does not have them?

Their position is not likely to satisfy everyone. Not only is their account of Zionist history unsettling in light of today’s thinking with the emphasis they place on Zionist plans to expel Arabs from most of the Palestinian mandate not only historically but still in the hearts of many today, but Walt and Mearsheimer point out in their conclusion that the cost of supporting a Jewish state that engages in the kind of policies it does in the Occupied Territories and toward its neighbors is a high one for the United States to pay. Our basic national interests in the region, they assert, are to stop terrorism, to impede the spread of
WMD, and to secure a stable flow of petroleum at affordable prices. All these concerns are complicated by working with Israel as it is now. They do not buy the argument that some kind of special relationship should exist that privileges Israel over other nations with whom we look to cooperate. They nonetheless raise none of the flags one might expect with respect to the legitimacy of Israel’s existence.

What emerges from this review is something of a contradictory position: Walt and Mearsheimer assert in one breath not only that Israel is a legitimate state but also that we should underwrite its survival. Yet with the next breath they lambaste Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians while they stress the manifold costs to the United States of giving a blank check to an Israel bent on intimidating its neighbors. Those who laud the book’s argument well refer to the first breath, while those concerned by its perspective are sure to stress the second. I do not see how on this score the book could be considered anti-Semitic, but I can appreciate the nervousness some may feel before the strength of their charge.

A second test is whether Walt and Mearsheimer treat the Israel Lobby, and more especially its Jewish leadership—particularly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC—In a way that makes it appear conspiratorial, out of the mainstream, or illegitimate as an actor on the American political stage. They do not. To be sure, they feel that the national interests of the United States are being ill-served by the policies the Israel Lobby advances. Still, they repeatedly point out that a good deal of American politics is interest group based.

Had they wanted to, Walt and Mearsheimer might have argued, as at times Robert Dahl has, that one of the greatest flaws in the American democratic system is the degree of power special interests possess. Agribusiness or pharmaceuticals, energy corporations or banks, the National Rifle Association or the American Association of Retired Persons—all of these self-concerned groups and many, many more, find their needs met by special interest lobbying that can be argued to sacrifice the common good to the desires of narrow interests. But the authors do not indict even to the smallest extent the way American democracy works in terms of special interest lobbying. At one point, they do write that campaign finance reform that resulted in public financing of elections would be enormously detrimental to the Israel Lobby’s influence and presumably to most other special interest lobbies as well. But the authors are at pains to assert that given the way American politics works, the Israel Lobby is a perfectly legitimate undertaking. This is no more a “conspiracy” against the common good than any of a host of other special interests long active in American public life.

Still, whatever their apparent acknowledgment of the right of special interests to act as they will, the books suggests that the Lobby has a degree of power without parallel in American foreign policy. The failure of any of the major candidates for the 2008 presidential contest to take any other than a supplicant role toward AIPAC is one piece of evidence. The long history of the Lobby’s ability to bring even the White House to reverse course is another. The book cites Jewish activists and many political leaders—Bill Clinton,
Newt Gingrich, Richard Armey, and Lee Hamilton among others—who assert that the Lobby is without equal in making policy in Washington in foreign affairs (152ff).

Once again, we have the first breath/second breath phenomenon. Walt and Mearsheimer are careful to say that special interest lobbying is as American as apple pie only to pile on so much evidence of special interest success in the case of the Israel Lobby that the reader may feel the American democracy is a terribly flawed affair and that there is no better illustration of its shortcomings than the exercise of Jewish power. Still, by this second measure, their attitude toward AIPAC and the lobby in general, however hostile it may be, cannot be termed anti-Semitic as I understand the term.

The third test is the question of “dual loyalties.” The Israel Lobby may fit in well enough to the American style of politics, but do its proponents themselves act in ways that suggest that although they are American nationals, the security of Israel is what most concerns them such that they use their rights as citizens to pursue the foreign policy objectives of a foreign state? In a word, are they disloyal to the United States?

On this question, Walt and Mearsheimer appear to be categoric: “Any notion that Jewish Americans are disloyal citizens is wrong...those who lobby on Israel’s behalf are acting in ways that are consistent with long-standing political traditions. Indeed, political life in the United States has long proceeded from the assumption that all individuals have a variety of attachments and loyalties...” (147) That said, we once again find evidence that to some extent belies this assertion. Thus, their book cites Malcolm Hoenlein, director of the Conference of Presidents and often mentioned for the influence he wields in Washington, as saying that should Israel have opposed (as it did) President Bush’s 2003 “road map,” “we will not hesitate to make our voice heard,” for “I devote myself to the security of the Jewish state” (122, 150). The authors agree with George Packer that for neoconservatives like Douglas Feith and David Wurmser “the security of Israel was probably the prime mover behind their support for the [Iraq] war” (240). And they cite Elliott Abrams, head of the Middle East section of the National Security Council, and more recently counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, as declaring, “There can be no doubt but that Jews, faithful to the covenant between God and Abraham, are to stand apart from the nation in which they live. It is in the very nature of being Jewish to be apart—except in Israel—from the rest of the population” (167).

Nor are these four politically prominent American Jews the only ones Walt and Mearsheimer cite who appear to have as their foremost consideration not American, but Israeli, security interests when they argue the orientation of U.S. foreign policy. Thus, there is a section entitled “Think Tanks That Think One Way” (175ff) that includes Martin Indyk's Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, and a host of other policy centers where to be “pro-Israel” means that Washington should underwrite without objection for its own foreign policy whatever it is that Jerusalem decides is in Israel’s interest. The section “Unity in Diversity and the Norm against Dissent” (120ff) lays out in still more detail the ways many American Jews...
have come to defer to Jerusalem’s bidding in determining where they should stand with respect to American foreign policy.

In short, once again, Walt and Mearsheimer make a declaration that appears to exonerate Jewish Americans from a slate of charges that might indict them for the mess that is American policy in the Middle East only to provide evidence that such accusations might have more than a hint of truth to them. Had Walt and Mearsheimer wanted to do so, they might have found multiple references from other ethnic groups—Irish, Cuban, Armenian among others—with the same sentiment expressed: valued as one’s American citizenship is, its utility in good part is to use one’s power as a citizen to serve the interests of one’s kinfolk abroad. In *Foreign Attachments* I gave many examples of this kind of thinking, as if it were naturally assumed that what is good for the United States is to serve the foreign policy priorities of one’s ancestral homeland. The same might be said as well of corporate interests whose primary concern is the bottom line, even if this means exporting American jobs and technology abroad, or of religious communities who feel that their understanding of their moral obligations should take precedence over whatever policy the United States government has decided is appropriate.

Whether Walt and Mearsheimer are giving aid and comfort to anti-Semitism by their findings on this score is thus in the eye of the beholder. That there are American Jews who use their power as citizens to advance Israel’s interests as decided by Jerusalem seems evident. That this differs in any marked way from the behavior of many other ethnic, religious, or corporate communities who also pursue their narrow interests without regard for what is good for America (whatever their protestations of patriotism to the contrary) is equally evident.

The fourth test is whether Walt and Mearsheimer in fact exaggerate the power of the Israel Lobby in the making of American Middle East policy. If they make the United States political system a pawn of this special interest denying the government an autonomy that it actually has might not this be properly construed as anti-Semitism?

Here is what I find to be the most debatable part of the book, the one of most concern to those who fear its findings could be used by anti-Semites. I do not doubt but that Israel itself and the Israel Lobby pushed hard for the American invasion of Iraq and would welcome a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities if all else fails to derail Tehran’s program to develop WMD. Yet, does the book adequately survey the range of other actors and motives at work in American foreign policy so that the power of the Lobby is set within a larger context that gives us a measure of its relative power? I fear they do not.

Suppose, for example, that Walt and Mearsheimer had been leftists concerned to show that the invasion of Iraq reflected corporate American interests to control the international supply of gas and oil. They might have assembled citations from many actors, pointed to the past business roles of both the president and the vice president and to the ultimate policy decision made in Washington, and thereupon concluded that energy considerations
(not restricted to corporate interests but as part of great power positioning) were the most important motive force underlying the war that begin in March 2003.3 Would we unquestionably have accepted such an argument? I doubt it.

The question is the extent not to which the Lobby’s job was simply facilitated by the fact that the president, vice president, and the defense secretary were looking for “a splendid little war,” but that the Lobby may itself actually have been used by the administration rather the other way around. Indeed, Bush’s own religious fervor (as well as his relationship with his father and with the Texas culture in which he is steeped) could provide us with major insights as to the origins of the Iraq War and the current threats against Iran. Yet instead of indicating the independent wishes of these powerful actors for a war such as with Saddam, Walt and Mearsheimer rather let them off the hook. Their book suggests the power of the Lobby by indicating points at which the president was critical of Israel, or wavered on policy that Israel might prefer toward the Palestinians, Syria or Iran, only to be brought in to line by the Lobby. Bush and Cheney emerge as stick figures, easily manipulated, to a degree that surely needs far more defense than is given.

These are critical matters. Are we to believe that it was the Lobby, virtually alone, that achieved the various results we witness? A phrase such as that the Lobby was “necessary but not sufficient” for the invasion of Iraq raises the question of what were the motive forces that made for a “sufficient” determination. There is no answer. Was it simply 9/11? If, as the authors acknowledge, it is unlikely that had Albert Gore been president he would have invaded Iraq, what then of the character of President Bush? In the same paragraph as the “necessary but not sufficient” citation we find them writing “absent the lobby's influence, there almost certainly would not have been a war” (17). But they would seem to agree that absent Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld we might not have had the invasion either.

What, then, was the role of the Bush administration—policy-makers composed entirely of gentiles, it should be remembered—autonomous and independent of the Israel Lobby? That the convictions of the administration and the Lobby converged can be little in doubt. But that the gentiles in charge of policy were marionettes with the strings pulled by the Jews and their allies...here I can not follow.

My concern, then, is that Walt and Mearsheimer exaggerate the Lobby’s power. While I certainly believe that their book renders a service in altering us to the modus operandi of a group with enormous influence in Washington, one that is systematically overlooked by students of American foreign policy, I also believe that their failure to weigh this power against other forces that converged in the decision to go to war opens the door to their argument being misappropriated in a way that could be frankly anti-Semitic. Or take the current possibility of an attack on Iran to end its program of nuclear development. The Lobby and Israel most certainly favor such a strike should diplomatic negotiations fail, as today appears likely. But surely the president and his immediate advisors (along with many others) favor strong action of some kind for reasons that dovetail with that of the

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Lobby but nonetheless reasons that rest on their own bottoms, that they would hold to even if Israel did not exist.

Something of the same might be said about the way in which the book simplifies the character of the neoconservatives. The evidence is clear that they wanted to attack Iraq, in part for the sake of increasing Israel's security in the Middle East. But it would be simplifying the character of the neoconservatives considerably to reduce them to being no more than agents of Israel's security concerns.

As I have indicated at length in A Pact with the Devil, the neoconservatives (both of the current generation and their predecessors going back to the late 1930s) were committed opponents of totalitarian systems in all their guises, be they fascist or communist or of the sort seen more recently with Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, or Saddam Hussein in Iraq. They correspondingly championed American military primacy not just for the sake of Israel but also for the well-being of liberal democracies everywhere, be they in Western Europe or East Asia, or in parts of the planet where forces struggling for democratic governments have yet to be successful.

But the treatment of the neoconservatives in Walt and Mearsheimer's volume is almost as thin as that of the Bush administration. That is, they emerge as if to some extent parachuted on to the American scene thinking of Israel first, last, and always. I repeat: that they were right-wing Zionists linked to the Likud party in Israel is undeniable, just as their concern for Israel's security was an important aspect of their concerns. But their agenda was far more nationalist and cosmopolitan, domestically as well as internationally, than their character is as it emerges in The Israel Lobby. The reduction of neocon concerns to all Israel all the time is simply not fair.

To conclude. The Israel Lobby is not an anti-Semitic book. Rather, it should be seen primarily as a welcome approach to the study of ethnic group politics in the United States, a chance to see the real strength of right-wing Jewish power in this country so far as foreign affairs are concerned and to debate its meaning. We should learn from it how to debate ethnic preferences in world affairs as we do those of corporate or financial interests (not at all well to be sure, but at least without the high emotion that characterizes ethnic group clashes). Both authors are structural realists in international relations terms, and they have succeeded in raising again the fundamental insight of this school of thought, that in the anarchy of world affairs a self-protective concern for national interests should be the first concern of American foreign policy. The blank check Washington has long given to Israel has been done real damage to the national interest. As such, the book is a significant publication well worthy of a careful reading.

Yet at the same time, history reminds us that there has been a temptation as old as Christian history to "pin it on the Jews." Whatever the intention of the authors, this book's failure to weigh the contribution of elements other than the Israel Lobby to a range of
Middle East decisions, is not simply to fault the book's message but to be concerned that it could be misappropriated by sinister forces wishing ill to Israel and the Jewish diaspora.

Let me conclude by returning to the historical moment in which the book appears. Published say a decade ago, the volume would presumably not have caused anything like the controversy it has today. The American invasion of Iraq entails a serious reversal for American power by any historical standard. Just who was responsible for this disastrous decision is sure to be asked everywhere. But just as it would be an error to argue that the Israel Lobby was not at all involved in the making of this calamity, just as surely it is an error to exaggerate the role of the Lobby. The reason is perfectly evident: Jews have too often had bad developments unfairly, indeed murderously, laid at their doorstep. In talking about the Jewish role in politics one therefore has a special obligation to weigh their influence judiciously. In my opinion, this book fails to exercise such a discriminatory sense, leaving the reader with a sense of a degree of right-wing Jewish culpability in this disastrous undertaking that I believe to be exaggerated. The result may be to fan genuinely anti-Semitic feelings at home and abroad whatever the intentions of Walt and Mearsheimer.

A fifth and final test is whether the authors understand that anti-Semitism is indeed a powerful historical current capable of surfacing even in environments where its presence might seem unlikely. Do they understand that their criticism of Jewish power might be taken up by others and used in ways that are unquestionably anti-Semitic? Do they rebuke beforehand such appropriation of their material?

The answer is positive. Walt and Mearsheimer acknowledge the serious problem of anti-Semitism in today's world as historically, and they deplore use of their arguments in ways that could reignite the kind of genocidal hatred all too familiar in Western history. They point out that the Jewish American community votes by a large majority for the Democratic, not the Republican Party, and that opinion polls of Jewish Americans have indicated more reserve about the Iraq War than expressed by the general population as well as strong support for the creation of a Palestinian state. One should not confuse the American Jewish community with its political leadership on world affairs. That said, it is nonetheless regrettable that by diminishing the role of actors other than the Lobby in making America's Middle East policy, the volume might provide aid and comfort to anti-Semitism in a way that these two distinguished political scientists would well deplore.
First expounded by the authors in the London Review of Books in 2006, the concept of a pro-Israel lobby in the States with a disproportionate and damaging effect on US foreign policy provoked outrage amongst the American Jewish community and fevered debate worldwide. Many branded the book both inaccurate and anti-Semitic, but the neutral treatment of the topic makes it hard to justify either of those accusations. That the Israeli government is unconditionally supported by the American government is beyond doubt, but does the pro-Israel lobby hold sway through sheer bloody-mindedness, or an ele...