

APRIL 13

The lobby and the bulldozer

Weeks after a British magazine published a long article by two American professors titled "The Israel Lobby," the outrage continued to howl through mainstream U.S. media.

A Los Angeles Times op-ed article by Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Max Boot helped to set a common tone. He condemned a working paper by professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt that was excerpted in the London Review of Books.

The working paper, Boot proclaimed, is "nutty." And he strongly implied that the two professors – Mearsheimer at the University of Chicago and Walt at Harvard – are anti-Semitic.

Many who went on the media attack did more than imply. On April 3, for instance, the same day that the Philadelphia Inquirer reprinted Boot's piece from the L.A. Times, a notably similar op-ed appeared in the Boston Herald under the headline "Anti-Semitic Paranoia at Harvard."

And so it goes in the national media echo chamber. When a Johns Hopkins University professor weighed in on the op-ed page of the Washington Post, the headline was blunt: "Yes, It's Anti-Semitic." The piece flatly called the Mearsheimer-Walt essay "kooky academic work" – and "anti-Semitic."

But nothing in the essay is anti-Semitic.

Some of the analysis from Mearsheimer and Walt is arguable. A number of major factors affect Uncle Sam's Middle East policies in addition to pro-Israel pressures. But no one can credibly deny that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee is one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington, where politicians know that they can criticize Israel only at their political peril.

Overall, the Mearsheimer-Walt essay makes many solid points about destructive aspects of U.S. support for the Israeli government. Their assessments deserve serious consideration.

For several decades, to the present moment, Israel's treatment of Palestinian people

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has amounted to methodical and despicable violations of human rights. Yet criticism of those policies from anyone (including American Jews such as myself) routinely results in accusations of anti-Jewish bigotry.

The U.S. media reaction to the essay by professors Mearsheimer and Walt provides just another bit of evidence that they were absolutely correct when they wrote: "Anyone who criticizes Israel's actions or argues that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over U.S. Middle Eastern policy – an influence AIPAC celebrates – stands a good chance of being labeled an anti-Semite. Indeed, anyone who merely claims that there is an Israel Lobby runs the risk of being charged with anti-Semitism, even though the Israeli media refer to America's 'Jewish Lobby.' In other words, the Lobby first boasts of its influence and then attacks anyone who calls attention to it. It's a very effective tactic: anti-Semitism is something no one wants to be accused of."

Sadly, few media outlets in the United States are willing to confront this "very effective tactic." Yet it must be challenged. As the London-based Financial Times editorialized on the first day of this month: "Moral blackmail – the fear that any criticism of Israeli policy and U.S. support for it will lead to charges of anti-Semitism – is a powerful disincentive to publish dissenting views. It is also leading to the silencing of policy debate on American university campuses, partly as the result of targeted campaigns against the dissenters."

The Financial Times editorial noted: "Reflexes that ordinarily spring automatically to the defense of open debate and free enquiry shut down – at least among much of America's political elite – once the subject turns to Israel, and above all the pro-Israel lobby's role in shaping U.S. foreign policy."

The U.S. government's policies toward Israel should be considered on their merits. As it happens, that's one of the many valid points made by Mearsheimer and Walt in their much-vilified essay: "Open debate will expose the limits of the strategic and moral case for one-sided U.S. support and could move the U.S. to a position more consistent with its own national interest, with the interests of the other states in the region, and with Israel's long-term interests as well."

But without open debate, no significant change in those policies can happen. That inertia – stultifying the blood of the body politic by constricting the flow of information and ideas – is antithetical to the kind of democratic discourse that we deserve.

Few other American academics have been willing to expose themselves to the kind of professional risks that John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt took by releasing their provocative paper. And few other American activists have been willing to expose themselves to the kind of risks that Rachel Corrie took when she sat between a Palestinian

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home and a Caterpillar bulldozer in Gaza three years ago.

The bulldozer, driven by an Israeli army soldier on assignment to demolish the home, rolled over Corrie, who was 23 years old. She had taken a nonviolent position for human rights; she lost her life as a result. But she was rarely praised in the same U.S. media outlets that had gone into raptures over the image of a solitary unarmed man standing in front of Chinese tanks at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

In sharp contrast to the high-tech killers who run the Israeli military apparatus and the low-tech killers who engage in suicide bombings, Rachel Corrie put her beliefs into practice with militant nonviolence instead of carnage. She exemplified the best of the human spirit in action; she was killed with an American-brand bulldozer in the service of a U.S.-backed government.

As her parents, Cindy and Craig Corrie, said in a statement on her birthday a few weeks after she died: "Rachel wanted to bring attention to the plight of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories, a people she felt were largely invisible to most Americans."

In the United States, the nonstop pro-Israel media siege aims to keep them scarcely visible.

Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com