

Obama Caves to Israel Lobby

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On Tuesday morning Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair, employed the indicative mood in describing the high value that Chas Freeman, his appointee to head the National Intelligence Council (NIC), will bring to the job - "his long experience and inventive mind," for example. By five o'clock in the afternoon, Freeman announced that he had asked that his selection "not proceed."

Not one to mince words, Freeman spelled out the strange set of affairs surrounding the flip-flop and the implications of what had just happened. Borrowing the pointed warning from George Washington's Farewell Address against developing a "passionate attachment" to the strategic goals of another nation, Freeman made it clear that he was withdrawing his "previous acceptance" of Blair's invitation to chair the NIC because of the character assassination of him orchestrated by the Israel Lobby.

The implications? Freeman was clear:

"The outrageous agitation...will be seen by many to raise serious questions about whether the Obama administration will be able to make its own decisions about the Middle East and related issues...[It casts] doubt on its ability to consider, let alone decide what policies might best serve the United States rather than those of a Lobby intent on enforcing the will and interests of a foreign government..."

"The aim of this Lobby is control of the policy process through the exercise of a veto over the appointment of people who dispute the wisdom of its views...and the exclusion of any and all options for decision by Americans and our government other than those it [the Lobby] favors."

Foreign policy analyst Chris Nelson described the imbroglio as a reflection of the "deadly power game on what level of support for controversial Israeli government policies is a 'requirement' for U.S. public office." Before the flip-flop on Freeman was announced, Nelson warned, "If Obama surrenders to the critics and orders Blair to rescind the Freeman appointment, it is difficult to see how he can properly exercise leverage, when needed, in his conduct of policy in the Middle East. That, literally, is how the experts see the stakes in the fight now under way."

The fight is now over.

Schadenfreude

Sen. Chuck Schumer, (D-New York) led Lobby boasting just minutes after the Freeman debacle was announced. Schumer was clear: "His [Freeman's] statements against Israel were way over the top...I repeatedly urged the White House to reject him, and I am glad

they did the right thing.”

And, as Glen Greenwald has noted, “Lynch mob leader Jonathan Chait [of the New Republic and author of a recent Washington Post op-ed on the subject], who spent the last week denying that Israel was the driving force behind the attacks on Freeman,” now concedes the obvious.

Greenwald quotes Chait: “Of course I recognize that the Israel Lobby is powerful, and was a key element in the pushback against Freeman.”

Neoconservative Daniel Pipes offered an anatomy of the crime, blog-bragging about how it was conducted:

“What you may not know is that Steven J. Rosen of the Middle East forum was the person who first brought attention [on February 19] to the problematic nature of Freeman’s appointment...Within hours, the word was out and three weeks later Freeman has conceded defeat. Only someone with Steve’s stature and credibility could have made this happen.”

The same Steve Rosen? The same one who is currently on trial for violations of the Espionage Act involving the transmission of classified information intended for Israel? Yes, one and the same! This has to be the purest brand of gall that ever came down the Pipes.

This “morning after,” I find myself wondering when White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel – another staunch supporter of the Lobby who reportedly was Schumer’s go-to guy on the get-Freeman campaign – saw fit to let Admiral Blair in on the little secret that no way could he have Freeman. And why Blair tucked tail.

In a March 8 letter to Admiral Blair, we at Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) [endorsed his appointment of Freeman](#) and decried the campaign to derail it. We seven signatories (with cumulative experience of 130 years) noted that the Freeman case was the first time we witnessed such a well-coordinated campaign to reverse the appointment of an official to an intelligence job not requiring Senate confirmation.

In other words the influence of the Israel Lobby is seeping ever deeper into the ranks of the intelligence community.

Military Mindset

It seems altogether possible that Admiral Blair, accustomed to military command authority, assumed he had the right to appoint his senior staff and did not think to check out the naming of Freeman with White House and other politicians hypersensitive to pressure from the Lobby.

And this points up a host of other problems. One is that of having military officers, active or retired, running national intelligence. It appears to be beyond their ken to consider resigning on principle.

I imagine it never occurred to Blair that he might have quit on the spot as soon as he learned that Freeman was being jettisoned a couple of hours after Blair had praised him to the skies; or that, earlier, he might have threatened to resign if the Obama administration let itself be bullied in this way.

Blair is no neophyte, but he clearly underestimated the Lobby's power compared with his own. It appears the White House told Blair to treat the Freeman appointment as though in the subjunctive mood – long enough to “run it up the flagpole and see who salutes,” as the saying goes.

Then, when the Lobby made sure there were no salutes, but rather the strongest and most scurrilous spitting, Freeman was hauled on down. That may be the way they do things in Chicago, as well as in Washington.

The Freeman flip-flop is merely the latest sign that Obama is afraid to take on the Lobby. But the world is watching the new president. Most will interpret the new president's acquiescence in this charade as a sign of weakness – of his not being his own man. This is a distinct liability as Obama prepares to meet next month with the likes of Vladimir Putin who will be taking his measure.

The encounter with Putin brings to mind another young president's first meeting with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961.

Khrushchev had studied the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs in April 1961; he would have understood if Kennedy had chosen either to leave Castro alone or to destroy him. When Kennedy was rash enough to approve a strike on Cuba but not bold enough to finish the job, in Khrushchev's view, the latter decided he was dealing with an inexperienced young leader who could be intimidated and blackmailed – one who would shrink from hard decisions.

Kennedy later said of his encounter with Khrushchev in Vienna, “He beat the hell out of me.” The meeting gave him to believe that Kennedy might well back down if the USSR put missiles in Cuba.

As for Israel, the Russians were better able to understand Washington's “passionate attachment” to Israel in strategic terms, as the Cold War played out in the Middle East and Washington had a perceived need to have Israel as a permanent “battleship” there. Now the Russians see the power of the Israel Lobby for what it is – who can miss it? The Obama administration is seen as caving under political pressure.

Although the Russians continue to be amazed at the Lobby's strong influence over U.S. policy, the Russians are happy as clams to sit back and watch as the identification of the U.S. with Israeli policy inflicts incalculable damage to U.S. interests throughout the region and beyond.

Though a sportsman, Putin is best at chess. He is likely to shy away from playing basketball with our new president. Obama will have to beat Putin at his own game – and Obama now has shown himself easy to push around.

Israeli Adventurism

With Freeman's withdrawal, there is surely much gloating among the politically aware in Israel. Gloating is one thing; dangerous miscalculation is another.

The danger is particularly high as Benjamin Netanyahu takes over as Israeli prime minister. Netanyahu and his close “neoconservative” friends in the U.S. make no bones about their preference for a Bush/Cheney-style preventive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

As Gareth Porter and I write in today's Miami Herald, the specter of such a strike takes on more reality with Netanyahu as prime minister. He, too, is taking the measure of our young president and may draw very dangerous conclusions from his subservience to the Lobby, as well as the key role played by chief of staff Rahm Emanuel in the White House.

Impact on Intelligence

The effect of the Freeman affair on the intelligence community is easy to predict. Those who were looking forward to a fearless integrity will be deeply disappointed. They may seek honest work elsewhere, if they perceive that Blair is only titular head of intelligence and that pro-Lobby political operatives like Emanuel are calling the shots.

On the other hand, those managers and analysts who were pleased as punch to be sent over to brief the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), created by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) will be delighted. This briefing practice, encouraged by the Bush/Cheney administration, was highly irregular for a non-partisan intelligence community to be engaged in. It can be expected to flourish now, with the abject object lesson of Freeman's demise.

Unconscionable Timidity

On October 5, 2007 I published [an article on Israel's deliberate attempt](#), on June 8, 1967, to sink the USS Liberty in international waters off the Sinai, killing 34 of the Liberty crew and wounding over 170 in the process.

The lead was:

"So Who's Afraid of the Israel Lobby? Virtually everyone: Republican, Democrat - Conservative, Liberal. The fear factor is non-partisan, you might say, and palpable. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee brags that it is the most influential foreign policy lobbying organization on Capitol Hill, and has demonstrated that time and again, and not only on Capitol Hill."

The point? In June 1967, the Israelis learned that they could get away, literally, with murder and still not endanger their influence in Washington.

Events of the past weeks demonstrate that they and their Lobby are equally good at character assassination. It is embarrassingly shameful to watch President Obama acquiesce in all of this.

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