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Why did the Harman case break now?

by Philip Weiss

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The Jane Harman case is confusing to newcomers. The most important question that arises is why now? Why four years after the phone call? It is the most important question because it speaks to the fact that the central fight here, between the Israel lobby and the critics of the Israel lobby, is a fight that has been going on for more than 60 years in the underground of the Washington establishment. It never dies because it involves principled conflicts that are never resolved. They are never resolved because the press and our politicians can't deal with these questions due to Harman-style orthodoxy/corruption, and the battle is suppressed. Though now and then it breaks the surface.

The specific reason the story is coming out now is that my side, the critics of the Israel lobby, are about to lose a battle: it looks like the case against Steven Rosen and Ken Weissman, the Israel lobbyists charged with sharing secrets with the Israelis five years ago, a case postponed forever, is going to get dropped by the Justice Department. The lawyers who believe in that case are surely upset about this and have managed to leak one of the big truffles of their investigation to the press so as to goose the public outrage over the central issue at stake: corruption of policymaking due to the Israel interest. I don't know that they're the source. But that's my supposition.

We may lose this fight, but we are winning the larger battle. Remember that We lost the Chas Freeman fight, the nomination of an Arabist/realist to the National Intelligence Council, but we won that one too because he freely exposed the Israel-first gang that had gone after him.

Suddenly the Israel lobby was on the front pages. It's on them again, a month later, with the Times coverage of Harman. This is unprecedented. At last the Israel lobby, which people denied as a fact of our political life when Steve Walt and John Mearsheimer had the Emperor's-new-clothes temerity to say it existed three years ago, is being openly mentioned. Andrea Mitchell said frankly on MSNBC the other day that it is a well-known and powerful lobby.

We are winning in this overall struggle because the central question, the justice of U.S. foreign policy to the Palestinians, has never been discussed and is never going away. It demands to be discussed. [The Forward has a smart but slightly panicky piece today](#) saying that the Harman case reflects a longheld belief in the federal government, among the professionals, that Jews have dual loyalty to Israel, going back almost to the foundation of the state. This is true. At least since the Truman overruled his State Department when it wanted to try and reverse partition in the spring of 1948, because bloody riots and ethnic cleansing had begun in Palestine, which partition was supposed to end, the lobby has won through White House access of the sort Harman allegedly boasted of in the wiretapped call; and those who are critical of a Jewish state or its policies have been excluded and smeared, as antisemites. The Forward piece carried that implication today. The issue has never gone away and many presidents have bitched about it. Kennedy was upset about Jewish influence-peddling on the matter even as Israel was acquiring nuclear weapons in defiance of his policy (Sy Hersh reported in the Samson Option). Nixon bridled at the lobbying. Jimmy Carter threw himself against the Israel lobby and didn't get reelected. George Bush I also took on the Israel lobby, the evil settlements policy that has now all but destroyed the two-state solution, and didn't get a second term. Bill Clinton and George Bush II embraced the expansion and the lobby, and had two terms. Chuck Percy and Paul Findlay sacrificed their political futures over trying to get the issue discussed.

The tragedy of our politics is that Barack Obama ran last year in some large measure against the neoconservative policy on the Middle East and the issue was never openly debated. Obama toed the line--and secretly believed that Palestinians are suffering the most. The neocons wanted to have that fight, and so did I. We both thought we would win if we could have it out; or they thought that McCain had a better chance of winning. But that question was ruled out of the presidential campaign, a time when people would get a chance to choose over the issue--just as Al Franken and Norm Coleman refused to differ on the question in the midst of their battle--and now the unresolved struggle has been imported into the Obama administration. He knows that resolving the issue is essential to the American interest in the Middle East, and to peace. It's the core issues, As King Abdullah and every other leader has told him. But because we could not have it out last year, a silent struggle is now taking place inside his administration, as Bruce Wolman has put it, between the realists and the Israel-firsters. Obama can throw a signal to one side and the other, but he can't take a firm stand against the Israel firsters without political cover. A few critical congressmen, Brian Baird and Kucinich and Donna Edwards, aren't going to give him that political cover. He needs his progressive base to take a stand on the question and openly, and allow the influential elites to divide on the issue on talk shows and at dinner parties. He can't drive the wedge without a sledgehammer-- public opinion, the press.

I'm optimistic because the Harman case came up three years ago, in Time Magazine, and died, and now it has come up again and gotten legs. It could not have become such a big story without political ground, created by the horrors of Gaza, and the Netanyahu/Lieberman election, and before that by the horrors of Iraq. Americans know that our Middle East policy

is skewed toward permanent war, one that Rahm Emanuel and Jane Hamran supported. Progressive Democrats are beginning to rally around the issue at last.

What the Harman leak suggests is that the establishment press and the disgruntled Israel critics within government have found each other at last. The story took 4 years, or 60 years to get out, but it is out, and there is a suggestion in the coverage that the intelligence of the American political process may at last be brought to bear on this question—instead of the intelligence of the back room dealers. When that happens, expect fairness.