



TRUMAN THE POLITICIAN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISRAEL

LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

Harry S. Truman was a temperamental and politically ambitious man. Both his sensitivities and ambition influenced his actions during his presidency. This was particularly the case when it came to Palestine because there existed a strong domestic Zionist lobby that played to Truman's wants and needs in order to influence his decision making. This article examines that process of policy formulation and shows how personality played into the president's behavior in ways that allowed the Zionist lobby to accomplish its ends. Though Truman's actions can be seen as a product of his personal sensitivities, his prioritizing of domestic political ambitions with regard to policy on Palestine set a harmful precedent for the future.

AFTER HOLDING THE OFFICE OF vice president for only eighty-two days, Harry S. Truman became president of the United States on 12 April 1945. It was a sign of U.S. Zionist activism and influence that it took the Palestine issue only six days—until 18 April—to come to his official attention. It did so in the form of a memo from Secretary of State Edward Stettinius. The memo read in part:

It is likely that efforts will be made by some Zionist leaders to obtain from you . . . commitments in favor of . . . unlimited Jewish immigration into Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state. As you are aware, the Government and the people of the United States have every sympathy for the persecuted Jews. . . . The question of Palestine is, however, a highly complex one and . . . therefore, I believe you would probably want to call for full and detailed information on the subject before taking any particular position . . . There is continual tenseness in the situation . . . and as we have interests in the area which are vital to the United States, we feel that this whole subject is one that should be handled with the greatest care.¹

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On the face of it, this communication was simply informing the new President of a sensitive situation touching on U.S. national interests in the Middle East. However, Truman read much more into it. Indeed, he reacted to Stettinius's words as if they were an unwanted lecture from a source for whom he had little respect. "The striped pants boys warned me, in effect, to watch my step. They thought I really didn't understand what was going on over there."²

THE FOUNDATIONS OF TRUMAN'S PALESTINE VIEWS

Why should Harry Truman have reacted in this fashion? The strengths and weaknesses of personality, personal ambition, the choice of advisors (who complemented his personality and ambitions), and the conditioning effects of past experiences are at the root of his reaction. Here, I break these down to a number of factors that caused him to take offense at the State Department's attempt to do its job and brief him on Palestine. An understanding of these factors is essential to explaining the way he subsequently handled the issue of Palestine and Israel.

Truman's Political Ambition

Truman was a man whose political appetite grew with the eating. He was a politician who had come up the political ladder one rung at a time, holding office at county, state, and national levels. At least until he got to the White House, he was able to master each of his offices in succession. Truman had learned how to be a politician under the tutelage of "Boss Tom" Pendergast (whose son was an old army buddy of Truman's). Boss Tom ran the Democratic Party machine in Jackson County, Missouri, and had recruited him for the elected post of county judge in 1922. As Truman progressed to higher office, the habit of operating as a machine politician never left him. He once told an audience that "a politician is a man who understands government and it takes a politician to run a government. A statesman is a politician who has been dead ten or fifteen years."³

For Truman, being a politician meant that you ran a political network that efficiently and relatively honestly made government work. Within that context he took seriously the notion now so readily associated with his name: "the buck stops here." And, if Truman was going to be responsible for the outcomes of orders given, he expected others to loyally carry them out. This simple equation might have worked well at all levels up to and including his position as senator. But the presidency was at the apex of multiple and vast departments, each with well-defined missions and set traditions in terms of handling their responsibilities. Simple machine politics, where the boss just made policies and the bureaucracy just carried them out, simply was not sufficient at this level of government. Ultimately, what was required of a president was the skill of a statesman as well as a politician.

Truman had not sought the vice presidency back in January 1944, but once it was offered he probably realized that Franklin D. Roosevelt's poor health made the odds good that he would one day be president. When Roosevelt

died in April 1945 and Truman found himself heir to the Oval Office, he knew of no other way of going about business except with the “buck stops here” philosophy. Secretary of State Stettinius’s memo triggered Truman’s “the boss gives orders and the bureaucrat takes orders” mindset, and thus the State Department was probably the first of the executive bureaus to meet this aspect of the new president’s style of work.

In addition, his pride, combined with his political ambition, caused Truman quickly to set his sights on becoming president on his own merits come the 1948 elections. This was important to Truman because, despite his straight-talking and take-command behavior, he was really an insecure personality. One can probably trace this to his lower middle class economic origins and the need to improve himself so as to become eligible to marry the woman he loved. His wife Bess came from a wealthy family that had looked down on him and initially opposed the marriage. Truman’s courtship was long and difficult and full of striving to prove himself to Bess, her family, and himself. It left him with a lifelong need to prove that he could beat the other fellow even when the other fellow was richer and better connected than he was.⁴ Getting elected president must have seemed the ultimate test to Harry Truman. It was one he could not resist.

Truman’s Zionist Advisors

Truman’s handling of the “complex question” of Palestine would be strongly influenced by his political desire to be elected president in 1948. It could not have been otherwise, given the fact that U.S. Zionists had themselves made Palestine a seminal domestic political issue. Thus, it followed that Truman had to master the Palestine problem in a way that would serve his domestic political ambitions. Truman’s domestic political advisers were also keenly aware of this connection, and they too were responsive to Zionist influence.

This is not surprising. By the 1940s most of the domestic U.S. political establishment was allied to one or another Zionist organization. Thus, even if Truman was not consciously picking aides and advisers sympathetic to Zionism, the probability would be good that he would get such people in any case. And he did. These advisers, in turn, created an information environment for the president that exaggerated the importance of the “Jewish vote” for the next presidential election. They convinced Truman that all U.S. Jews favored a Jewish state in Palestine and that the support of these same Jews was vital for realizing his electoral ambitions. Truman never commissioned any independent research to confirm whether these widely accepted assertions were true. This was because there was no point at which Truman did not share his advisers’ Zionist-oriented assumptions. Thus, he simply absorbed what his domestic advisers told him and acted on their advice. A good example of this was his infamous Yom Kippur statement of 4 October 1946. On that day President Truman announced his support for a “viable Jewish state” in Palestine. Not only did he not consult the Arab states before doing this (as he was obligated to do by the pledges of his predecessor, Roosevelt), but he also did not consult the British government nor heed

the warnings of his State Department experts. The only people whose advice mattered to him were his domestic advisors. As James Reston wrote in the *New York Times* on 7 October 1946, "The President went against his advisers' foreign policy and chose to follow the promptings of those who were primarily interested in retaining Democratic majorities in Congress."

Principal among Truman's White House domestic advisors was Clark M. Clifford, a fellow native of Missouri and a lifelong practicing lawyer. Clifford's profession is important here because he seems to have seen Truman as his primary client. Defending and forwarding his client's interests were the most important things in Clifford's professional life. It overrode everything else, including U.S. national interests in the Middle East and the safety of U.S. diplomats in that region.

Clifford originally joined Truman's White House staff as assistant to the White House special counsel, Judge Samuel Rosenman (who, under Roosevelt, had acted as a liaison between the Zionists and the White House). When Rosenman left the position of special counsel in late 1945, Clifford succeeded him. Clifford soon became a close confidant of the president. Initially, this was based on little more than Clifford and Truman's shared interest in social drinking and playing poker. However, soon Clifford was dining with the president three times a week and giving his advice on all matters political. It was Clifford who emphasized the alleged importance of the voting potential of the United States' five million Jews, as well as Jewish funding to Truman's 1948 run for the presidency.⁵

It is doubtful that Clifford was committed to Zionism in any ideological way. He would later claim that his motivation, like that of his boss, was humanitarian. However, given Clifford's uncaring attitude toward the United States' diplomatic staff in the Middle East, it is hard to believe that he was much moved by high principle. More likely, his decision to back a Zionist state in Palestine, with all its violent and destabilizing consequences for millions of people, was made simply on the basis of its ability to help forward the political ambitions of the man he worked for. It was the action of an essentially unethical lawyer. Nonetheless, success trumps all and when Truman did win the election of 1948, Clifford's career took off. He would be a much sought after political advisor for the rest of his life.

Clifford was backed up by other advisors who did have ideological ties to the Zionists. One was Max Lowenthal, a Harvard-trained lawyer who served as an assistant to Clifford. He was considered to be the White House's staff expert on Palestine, although there is no evidence that Lowenthal at this time had ever traveled to that part of the Middle East or knew anything at all about Arab politics and culture. This apparently went unnoticed because the White House rarely, if at all, discussed the Arab side of the Palestine equation. Where did Lowenthal get the information that made him the White House "expert" on Palestine? Here are the known facts: Lowenthal's parents were Lithuanian Jewish immigrants and he grew up in a religious Jewish household. He developed lifelong friendships with prominent U.S. Zionist leaders such as Julian Mack, Felix Frankfurter, Louis Brandeis, and Robert Szold. Beyond that,

he seems not to have had, nor needed, much credentialing. Lowenthal was a discreet man, and so his role in urging a pro-Zionist position on the president, though described as seminal by Truman himself, has gone little noticed.⁶

Another congenitally discreet—though, in the end, better known—aide was David Niles. He was also an ideologically committed Zionist working within the White House inner circle and was one of only two Roosevelt aides retained by Truman (the other one being Samuel Rosenman). Niles served as Truman's special assistant for minority affairs, under which U.S. Jewish affairs fell. Like Lowenthal, Niles, a Polish Jewish immigrant who had grown up in Boston, was close to many of the U.S. Zionist leaders, particularly Rabbi Stephen Wise. In his professional capacity as assistant for minority affairs, Niles kept in constant contact with most Zionist leaders, American and otherwise. So close was this connection that Loy Henderson, head of the State Department's Office of Near East and African Affairs, was convinced that "every memorandum he sent to the White House would find its way immediately through Niles to the Zionists."⁷ According to Alfred Lilienthal, a politically active anti-Zionist Jew of the time, Niles fed confidential information from the White House to the Zionist leadership, and later to the Israeli government, during his tenure as an advisor to the president.⁸

Truman's Religious and Cultural Background

Truman's political proclivity to take Zionist advice was reinforced by the fact that he was a believing Christian steeped in Bible lore. From his boyhood Truman had been a "dedicated student of the Bible" and quoted it often. His speeches were full of Bible references and his knowledge of scripture informed not only his concept of morality but also his notions of Palestine's history.⁹ Thus, he believed he knew all that was important to know about Palestine. In particular he "knew" that Palestine was destined to be the God-given home of the Jews. Stettinius's suggestion that the State Department knew something important about Palestine that might run against this assumption caused the president to unfairly accuse many in the department of bias. "They were an anti-Semitic bunch over there," Truman said of the State Department's Near East office personnel. "They put the Jews in the same category as Chinamen and Negroes."¹⁰

This Christian fundamentalist orientation blended with a general cultural and religious outlook (shared by a majority of Americans) that identified the United

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States with the biblical myth of Hebrews conquering their "promised land." This story line had been alive in the U.S. mind since the days of puritans and pilgrim settlers. It had been used to rationalize the movement westward and give a religious flavor to U.S. "manifest destiny." From the 1920s onward, U.S. Zionists made use of this identification. They tirelessly asserted a similarity between the U.S. pioneer experience and the experi-

ence of Zionist settlers in Palestine. In the process they described the Palestinian Arabs as the equivalent of American Indian "barbarians."¹¹

Truman had no trouble falling in with this mythology. He was raised to believe in the concept of a God-blessed America. While the United States was a latter day promised land in the New World, Palestine was unquestionably the land promised by God to the Jews. He knew all about that from his Bible studies. As to contemporary Palestine, Truman claimed that he “knew the Arab point of view.”¹² By this he probably meant that he had read Roosevelt’s correspondence with Arab leaders and had such correspondence himself in his first years as president. However, there is no evidence that he sought to educate himself about the realities of Palestine that lay behind Arab concerns. Of the Palestinians themselves he probably knew nothing. Thus Truman’s knowledge and sympathies were completely one-sided. And they were based upon a steadfast belief that Bible stories were true history.

In this case the religiously influenced outlook shaping Truman’s views of Palestine were in tune with his assumed political needs. It fit neatly with his conviction that he needed the support of U.S. Jewry to win the 1948 elections and that U.S. Jews were Zionists.

Truman’s Class Bias and the Domestication of the Palestine Issue

As previously suggested, Truman’s advisors created a staunchly pro-Zionist information environment within the White House. That meant that among the Oval Office staff there were no critical voices when it came to Zionist plans for Palestine. What opposition he did encounter came from outside the president’s immediate setting. In this case, it came from the State Department. Unfortunately, Truman’s upbringing and personality caused him to have a class-based prejudice against what he believed to be the privileged, upper class personnel employed at the State Department. This attitude was another part of his insecurity complex mentioned above. In the case of the State Department personnel, Truman’s disdain expressed itself in his insistence (in the “I give the orders and you carry them out” format) that they cater to his lifelong passion for supporting those he considered worthy underdogs. In this case, the underdogs were the displaced Jewish refugees in Europe.¹³

Thus, it turned out that the only source of U.S. government opposition to the Zionists was seen by Truman as an aristocratic crowd of “striped pants boys” who, he alleged, wanted to disregard fair play when it came to the surviving victims of the Nazi Holocaust. “They had their priorities wrong,” Truman concluded, “they didn’t care enough about what happened to thousands of displaced persons who were involved [in the Palestine issue].”¹⁴

The principal State Department actors in this drama were Near East and African Affairs head Loy Henderson, Secretary of State George C. Marshall (Stettinius had resigned in June 1946), and his assistant Robert Lovett. Marshall had been the U.S. Army’s chief of staff during World War II and was the man Winston Churchill had called the “organizer of victory” in that conflict. In the conflict between the White House and State Department over Palestine, it was Henderson who most often represented the department’s position. Palestine policy, he asserted, should not only be guided by U.S.

national interest in the Arab world but also stay in tune with U.S. democratic traditions.

[I]n our considered opinion the active support by the Government of the United States of a policy favoring the setting up of a Jewish State in Palestine would be contrary to the policy which the United States has always followed of respecting the wishes of a large majority of the local inhabitants with respect to their form of government. . . . At the present time the United States has a moral prestige in the Near and Middle East unequaled by that of any other great power. We would lose that prestige and would likely for many years to be considered a betrayer of the high principles which we ourselves have enunciated during the period of the war.¹⁵

Henderson was, of course, correct from a foreign policy point of view. But for the White House, and the Congress as well, Palestine was no longer a foreign policy issue. In a letter dated 24 July 1945, Truman had laid out the U.S. politician's perspective on Palestine to Churchill. "There is a great interest in America in the Palestine problem. The drastic restrictions imposed [by the British] on Jewish immigration [into Palestine] . . . continue to provoke passionate protest from Americans."¹⁶ This popular concern had been building for a long time (certainly ever since the 1922 joint congressional resolution in support of the Balfour Declaration) and so by Truman's presidency all U.S. political decisions on the subject turned on the strength of Zionist-influenced domestic political calculations. For instance, when it came to Henderson's concern about "respecting the wishes of a large majority of the local inhabitants with respect to their form of government," President Truman, along with most other Americans paying attention to the Holy Land, had perceptually depopulated Palestine of its Arab inhabitants and replaced them completely with Zionist settlers. So, Truman tells us in his memoirs, "The Balfour Declaration, promising the Jews the opportunity to re-establish a homeland in Palestine, had always seemed to me to go hand in hand with the noble policies of Woodrow Wilson, especially the principle of self-determination."¹⁷ As to the Palestinian Arab majority's own right to self-determination (which Henderson took seriously), President Truman literally dismissed it. When referring to such rights in his memoirs, he always put the reference in quotation marks.¹⁸

Nor was Truman at all concerned with the great loss of prestige in the Arab world that so concerned Henderson. Such concerns had no resonance for a president fixated on domestic politics. As he reportedly told a gathering of U.S. diplomats in November 1945, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism. I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."¹⁹ Actually, Truman was mistaken in this last assertion. There were hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens of Arab descent in the United States in 1945. However, they were not politically organized to the point where they could compete with

the Zionists, and the president's aides kept their representatives out of the White House.²⁰ Thus, for Truman, they did not exist.

The personnel at the State Department seemed not to have understood how Truman's coming to the presidency had completed the "domestication" of the Palestine issue. Roosevelt, although the consummate domestic politician, understood that he somehow had to finesse U.S. politics and the desires and needs of important allies like Great Britain as well as governments that controlled, as did Saudi Arabia, vital oil resources essential to the success of Europe's reconstruction. Understanding this was part of what qualified him to be a statesman. Not so Harry Truman. For him, looking to the 1948 elections, domestic politics was supreme.

PRESIDENTIAL DOMINATION OF FOREIGN POLICY AND THE DEMOTION OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT

The factors described above helped create the context for Harry Truman's reaction to the State Department's position on Palestine. This reaction had everything to do with Truman's personality and career ambitions, and very little to do either with the reality in Palestine at that time or the long-standing, traditional role the State Department played in the formulation of foreign policy. The new president seemed either indifferent to such considerations or to misunderstand them. Thus, Truman's attitude only complicated the Palestine dilemma even as he proceeded to undermine the State Department's role as the agency that objectively assessed U.S. national interests. Under the circumstances, the issue of Palestine's future played itself out as a continuing battle between the White House and the State Department.

In 1947 the Arabs had rejected any notion of partition and, by virtue of making up the vast majority of its population, claimed the entire country and the right (so cherished in the West) of self-determination. The Zionists coveted all of Palestine but accepted partition as a first step toward fulfilling their ambitions.²¹ The State Department strongly opposed partition as unworkable and against U.S. interests. Henderson described partition as a recipe for war and, in the event of U.S. support for partition, a guarantor of "long-term Arab hostility."²² Truman, however, focused primarily on his forthcoming 1948 run for the presidency, found it politically expedient to align his own policy with that of the Zionists, and therefore supported partition. On 11 October 1947, he instructed the U.S. delegation to the UN to do just that in the upcoming UN General Assembly vote on the issue scheduled for late November. Clifford encouraged Truman by telling him that support for partition would help correct his "flagging popularity" by "winning back [the political support of] the Jews and the liberals."²³

On 24 November 1947, Truman told his own staff and the State Department that he did not want the country's UN delegation to "use threats or improper pressure of any kind on other delegations" to vote in favor of partition. However, members of his own staff, in particular Niles, were already using just

such tactics, including economic blackmail, and continued to do so in order to assure the resolution's passage.²⁴ As a result of what Truman would later meekly describe as "improper behavior,"²⁵ seven nations whose governments were inclined against partition ended up voting for it. This was sufficient to assure the victory for partition in the UN vote taken on 29 November 1947. In Palestine, the vote itself acted as an incitement to war, and fighting immediately broke out.

Because the State Department had predicted that the adoption of the UN partition resolution would lead to war, its personnel proceeded to take the precaution of negotiating a backup plan with the president. On 8 March 1948, in a meeting with Secretary of State Marshall, Truman had orally agreed to a plan presented to him by the State Department whereby the United States would continue to support the partition plan already passed unless its implementation resulted in unchecked warfare and chaos. In that event, the U.S. fallback position would be to support a temporary UN trusteeship for the area, a concept that had been gaining much ground within the international community and the UN as the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate. Trusteeship, however, was anathema to the Zionists because it would postpone if not derail Jewish statehood. On being informed of the backup plan (probably by Niles), the U.S. Zionists ratcheted up the pressure on Truman in an effort to shore up his support for partition come what may. Overwhelmed by it all, Truman decided to stop receiving Zionist leaders. Apparently, he believed his policy on Palestine was formulated clearly and would successfully carry him into the 1948 elections. But he had clearly lost track of the details.

Meanwhile, the violence on the ground in Palestine had been escalating. Much of it at this early stage took on a terrorist character, sowing fear and confusion throughout the civilian populations. The British, having already set 15 May 1948 as the formal date for withdrawing their occupying forces from the country, were reluctant to risk high casualties by placing themselves as peacekeepers between the warring parties. At the United Nations, second guessing the partition decision became more common.

While unsettled by the escalating violence in Palestine, President Truman seemed unable to understand his own role in bringing it about. He blamed everyone but himself and the Zionists. Thus, he blamed the UN for failing to create an "international police force" and blamed the Arabs for having "flatly" refused to work to "preserve peace and practice moderation."²⁶

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Then Truman did something that greatly complicated his position. Breaking his own rule about not meeting with any more Zionist lobbyists, he received the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann at the White House on the evening of 18 March 1948. Truman did this at the behest of his longtime Jewish friend Edward Jacobson, who in turn had been recruited to intervene with the president by Zionist members of B'nai B'rith.²⁷ Apparently forgetting his agreement with the State Department

to revive the trusteeship option in the event of chaos in Palestine, Truman personally assured Weizmann that the U.S. government would support partition without qualification. Unfortunately (but typically), Truman did not inform the State Department of this personal pledge, or even that he had seen Weizmann. When, on 19 March 1948, with violence and mayhem besetting Palestine, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Warren Austin, moved to suspend partition and announced his country's shift of support to temporary trusteeship, Truman exploded in anger. "This morning [March 20 1948] I find that the State Department has reversed my Palestine policy. The first I know about it is what I see in the papers! Isn't that hell? I'm now in the position of a liar and a double crosser. I've never felt so in my life."²⁸ Truman seems never to have considered how his own failure to inform the State Department of his dealings with Weizmann contributed to his predicament. The State Department was acting according to a preapproved script and had no way of knowing that Truman, in his conversation with the Zionist leader, had changed that script.

The clearly deteriorating situation between Truman and the State Department came to a head a little less than two months later, on 12 May 1948. With Britain's Mandate over Palestine officially to end three days later, the issue now was the timing of U.S. recognition for the soon-to-be-declared State of Israel. Secretary of State Marshall and his assistant Robert Lovett argued for delay. Recognition, they advised, should not be given until it could be determined whether the Jewish state was stable (or indeed would survive). Clifford was ardently pushing for immediate recognition. The two parties met on 12 May in the Oval Office, where Clifford laid out his reasons for quick recognition. At this point Marshall responded in anger, "Mr. President, I thought this meeting was called to consider an important and complicated problem in foreign policy. I don't even know why Clifford is here. He is a domestic adviser, and this is a foreign policy matter."²⁹ For Marshall, Clifford's advice amounted to "a transparent dodge to win a few votes" at the expense of "the great dignity of the office of the President."³⁰ Marshall was absolutely correct. What is surprising is that Marshall was surprised that Clifford had a role in this. Marshall's anger spilled over at the president himself: He "bluntly" told Truman that "if the President were to follow Mr. Clifford's advice and if in the elections I were to vote, I would vote against the President."³¹

Two days later, on 14 May, Clifford announced to Lovett that the time had come to recognize Israel. "The president was under unbearable pressure to recognize the Jewish state," asserted Clifford, and for this to be done promptly was "of the greatest possible importance to the president from a domestic point of view."³² Lovett said that to precipitate recognition would cause "a tremendous reaction . . . in the Arab world"³³ and requested a one-day delay so as to warn allied governments and U.S. embassies in the region. He was particularly concerned for the safety of U.S. diplomatic personnel in the Middle East, for there had already been violent incidents in front of U.S. embassies in Arab countries as a direct consequence of Truman's Palestine policy. Without referring the request to Truman, Clifford refused to consider any delay.³⁴

For Marshall and Lovett, the issue was the national interests of the United States. For Clifford, the successful election of his “client” Harry Truman was the national interest.

Ultimately Truman, like Clifford, did not care what the secretary of state or anyone else in the State Department thought about his Palestine policy. As far as the president (still operating in a machine politics frame of mind) was concerned, thinking was not the business of State Department personnel. Their business was simply to do as they were told. As Truman explains in his memoirs:

[T]he difficulty with many career officials in the government is that they regard themselves as the men who really make policy and run the government. . . . Too often career men seek to impose their own views instead of carrying out the established policy of the administration. . . . I wanted to make it plain that the President of the United States, and not the second and third echelon of the State Department, is responsible for making foreign policy, and, furthermore, that no one in any department can sabotage the President’s policy.³⁵

When all was said and done, Marshall proved the good soldier and marched to his commander’s orders. Henderson, who by this point was seen by Truman and his advisors as a true villain, was ultimately banned from any Middle East-related assignment and sent off to a diplomatic post in India.

Truman saw “striped pants boys” such as Henderson as enemies rather than as professional experts working in a long tradition of protecting the country’s national interests. For him, they were just a group of aristocrats who thought they knew more than he did and tried to push him around on that basis. He cut them out of the policy-making loop and did not listen to their advice on issues that might impact his domestic political ambitions. He never considered the possibility that the motive he assigned to them might be incorrect.

HUMANITARIANISM AND “GROUPTHINK”

Like so many other U.S. politicians, Truman had been encouraged by a combination of Zionist propaganda and popular anti-immigration sentiment to see Palestine as the only viable solution to the problem of Europe’s surviving Jewish displaced persons. This being the case, Truman could convince himself that his policy of support for the Zionist cause was not merely a function of political expediency or religious bias, but rather a humanitarian policy. “The fate of the Jewish victims of Hitlerism was a matter of deep personal concern to me.” Their plight “was a challenge to Western civilization, and as President I undertook to do something about it. One of the solutions being proposed was a national Jewish Home.” The use of the word “one” here was disingenuous. Truman never seriously considered any alternative solution. He described Palestine as “the land which represents for so many of them their only hope of survival.”³⁶

This assertion begs the question of the U.S. immigration laws that had kept most of the victims of the Nazis, including Jewish refugees, from coming to the United States throughout World War II. As a U.S. senator, Harry Truman had supported those laws for political reasons. As president, he had made a half-hearted effort to liberalize the immigration laws, but because of the negative popular reaction he had not pushed hard. Simply put, humanitarianism was trumped by domestic politics. A Jewish state in Palestine, on the other hand, with its positive domestic political benefits, was an open field for humanitarian gestures. In addition, Truman connected the Palestine solution to the “solemn promise” given in the Balfour Declaration, and his conviction was that “this promise . . . should be kept, just as all promises made by responsible, civilized governments should be kept.”³⁷

Clifford, Truman’s ally in this drama, also asserts that humanitarianism was a major motivation for Truman’s policy. “The charge that domestic politics determined our policy on Palestine angered President Truman for the rest of his life. In fact, the President’s policy rested on the realities of the situation in the region [and] on America’s moral, ethical, and humanitarian values.”³⁸ In contrast to Clifford, most of those in the government familiar with “the realities of the situation in the region” of Palestine, and who worked outside the White House inner circle, never believed this to be so. Marshall, Lovett, and Henderson were but the tip of the iceberg. Subsequent foreign policy officers such as Dean Rusk, George Kennan, Dean Acheson, and Paul Nitze all tended to agree with the country’s first secretary of defense James Forrestal’s assessment that Truman’s Palestine policy was motivated by “squalid political purposes.”³⁹ Ironically, while always a politician in his own eyes, Truman’s pursuit of such “political purposes” would mean that he became a “statesman” in the eyes of the Zionists. They promoted the notion that he had played the role of the ancient Persian ruler Cyrus (Truman’s own characterization of himself) in the founding of modern Israel.

Humanitarianism provided such a convenient cover for the essentially domestic political maneuvers of Truman and his aides that it might well have been true that, over time, they began to see their motivations in this light. How did this happen? What almost certainly developed within the White House was a form of groupthink. In his book, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Houghton Mifflin, 1972), Irving L. Janis shows how governing political elites create self-reinforcing decision-making circles that emphasize the same “glib ideological formulas on which rational policy makers, like many other people who share their nationalistic goals, generally rely in order to maintain self-confidence and cognitive mastery over the complexities of international politics.”⁴⁰ The way they do it is to start, sustain, and end with the same unquestioned set of assumptions about a situation and how to relate to it. Thus, the decision-making group becomes wholly like-minded, and even if initially there were doubters in their midst, they soon self-censor. In a process known as “confirmation bias,” only those facts and interpretations that support the assumptions are recognized and

applied. When public opinion also seems to support the assumptions of the decision makers on a given issue, the imperative not to question the assumptions becomes all the stronger.

This appears to have been the case with the Truman White House on the subject of Palestine. In that case, however, the groupthink environment was an imperfect one because the State Department, standing apart, did not play the groupthink game. Thus, they were a source of discord that quickly became resented. And, obviously, their advice was systematically ignored.

Ignored or not, the State Department personnel were active critics whose disagreement was bound to leak out into the public realm. And, because their charge of political expediency had the ring of truth to it, Truman and Clifford had to find a counterargument of solid ethical standing. Thus came the assertion that what primarily motivated Truman and his advisors was their high moral concern for the fate of Europe's Jewish displaced persons. At least in the case of Truman, this claim is consistent with his background for defending the underdog. What Truman and his advisors overlooked, however, was that taking the high road in terms of Europe's Jews automatically put them on a very low road in relation to the Arab majority of Palestine.

CONCLUSION

When Secretary of State Stettinius's Palestine memo reached Truman's desk, it unleashed reactions that the State Department people could not have imagined. Psychological insecurities, political ambitions, class bias, and perhaps other undiscovered issues swirled around the memo. These, in turn, started a chain reaction of resentment, anxiety, and defensiveness that was only imperfectly hidden from view by a process of groupthink. The White House reaction must have come as quite a shock to the men in the State Department.

Despite its rather messy psychological roots, Truman's approach to the issue of Palestine and Israel created a precedent that has rarely been departed from. With the exception of Dwight D. Eisenhower's forceful approach to Israel following the 1956 war, groupthink and confirmation bias have been consistent techniques in maintaining a pro-Zionist paradigm for the policy-making elites of the U.S. government. Humanitarianism has been replaced by a series of other rationalizations/cover stories, such as identification with and defense of Israeli democracy (such as it is) and the notion of Israel as a "strategic asset." But in fact, the chief motivator for the United States' pro-Zionist policies have remained the same—the power of the U.S. Zionist lobby and their allies to buy and/or bully the politicians and bureaucrats of both political parties. Nor is the State Department any longer a source of counterargument. In subsequent administrations the department was slowly but surely purged of those who had the courage to openly question a pro-Israel foreign policy.

President Truman may well have served, as Lovett suggested in 1948, as "the midwife" of the new state of Israel.⁴¹ But he can also be credited with helping to shape a pattern of foreign policy formulation tied not to humanitarianism,

much less national interest, but rather, as Forrestal described it, “squalid political purposes.” It is hard not to acknowledge Forrestal’s great prescience on this point. The essential aspects of Clifford’s advice to Truman have been institutionalized, and subsequent U.S. foreign policy on Israel-Palestine has, with few exceptions, been a response to domestic political pressure. This is Truman’s legacy and its harmful implications are yet to be fully played out.

ENDNOTES

1. Cited in Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 132–33.
2. Bruce J. Evensen, *Truman, Palestine and the Press: Shaping Conventional Wisdom at the Beginning of the Cold War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 129.
3. Harry Truman, Address to the Reciprocity Club in Washington, D.C., 11 April 1958.
4. See David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 66–80 and Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 4ff.
5. At least in terms of money, Clifford’s opinion was accurate. Truman’s railroad “whistle-stop” campaign trip was financed by Jewish businessman Abraham Feinberg. Truman was convinced that in doing so Feinberg made his election possible. See oral history interview with Abraham Feinberg, conducted by Richard McKinzie, 23 August 1973, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/feinberg.htm>.
6. Letter from Truman to Lowenthal, 3 and 23 April 1962, Max Lowenthal papers, University Archives, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.
7. Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, p. 77.
8. Alfred M. Lilienthal, *What Price Israel?* (Haverford: Infinity Publishing, 2003), p. 72.
9. Michael T. Benson, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), pp. 32ff.
10. Evenson, *Truman, Palestine and the Press*, p. 115.
11. See Lawrence Davidson, *America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), chapter 1.
12. Paul Charles Merkley, *American Presidents, Religion, and Israel: The Heirs of Cyrus* (Westport: Praeger Press, 2004), p. 3.
13. He looked to the underdog because he considered himself a perennial underdog.
14. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, p. 173.
15. U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945. The Near East and Africa*, vol. 8 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945), p. 728.
16. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 135.
17. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 133.
18. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 159.
19. Quoted in Richard H. Curtiss, “Truman Adviser Recalls May 14, 1948 U.S. Decision to Recognize Israel,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (May/June 1991), p. 17. The statement might be apocryphal.
20. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, pp. 209–12.
21. Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 32.
22. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, p. 184.
23. Donald Neff, *Fallen Pillars: U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Palestine and Israel Since 1945* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995), p. 49.
24. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, p. 187.
25. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 158.
26. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, p. 188.
27. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, p. 191.
28. Davidson, *America’s Palestine*, p. 193.
29. Richard Holbrooke, “Washington’s Battle Over Israel’s Birth,” *Washington Post*, 7 May 2008.

30. Alfred M. Lilienthal, "Remembering General George Marshall's Clash with Clark Clifford over Premature Recognition of Israel," *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs* (June 1999), <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/0699/9906049.html>.

31. Holbrooke, "Washington's Battle Over Israel's Birth." Unfortunately for Marshall, Truman's opponent in the 1948 election, Thomas Dewey, had also completely sold out to the Zionists.

32. Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p. 87.

33. Lilienthal, "Remembering General George Marshall's Clash with Clark Clifford."

34. Davidson, *America's Palestine*, p. 196.

35. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 165.

36. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, pp. 132, 135.

37. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 132.

38. Quoted in Clark Clifford and Richard Holbrooke, "President Truman's Decision to Recognize Israel," *Jerusalem Viewpoints*, no. 563 (1 May 2008), <http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DBID=1&LANGID=1&TMID=111&FID=376&PID=0&IID=2203>.

39. Davidson, *America's Palestine*, p. 175.

40. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Atlanta: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 38.

41. Davidson, *America's Palestine*, p. 196.