

How Israel Lobby Trained a Diplomat

Samantha Power, U.S. Ambassador-designate to the UN, once dared to suggest deploying a peace-keeping force to Israel to protect the lives on both sides, an idea that infuriated the Israel Lobby and taught Power a lesson in how she must temper her views on human rights, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

David Rieff's commentary on Samantha Power's confirmation hearing is a trenchant account of some of the worst in what we see in the process of confirming nominees for senior positions. Even by the standards of such hearings, Power's performance was notably obsequious.

This was an abuse of the process by the nominee, in the sense that in a proceeding ostensibly intended to learn more about the nominee we did not learn much at all except that she really, really wants the job of ambassador to the United Nations and is willing to shape her testimony in whatever way it takes to get the job.

Rieff cites the experience of Robert Bork as the master lesson for all subsequent nominees on the need to trim their views if they expect to get confirmed. That history is no doubt a factor, but to understand the pathologies of the confirmation process we should take note of the variety of ways in which that process gets abused. Many of those ways are not the work of nominees, but in at least one respect, as Power's case illustrates, they induce from nominees' behavior that only adds to the dysfunction.

A conspicuous and recent abuse was the attempt to cripple the work of the National Labor Relations Board and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau by refusing to bring any nominees for those bodies to a vote in the Senate. Threats from the Senate majority leader about exercising a so-called nuclear option won a temporary reprieve from that tactic, although there is no assurance we won't see it revived, and the chances are it will be.

One of the participants in that tactic, Senator Lindsey Graham, later acknowledged that the nominee to head the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau "was being filibustered because we don't like the law. That's not a reason to deny someone their appointment. We were wrong."

Even when the objective is not to cripple an agency or effectively vacate the law that created it, it has become commonplace for the confirmation process to be the vehicle for pursuing policy agendas that have nothing to do with the

nominee. This is at best an irrelevance and a drag on the process. It becomes abuse when confirmation votes may be determined by it.

The same Sen. Graham started crossing this line last week when he used questioning of Admiral James Winnefeld, nominated for another term as vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to push the idea that the Iranian regime is still an awful and extreme beast despite the election to the Iranian presidency of Hassan Rouhani.

At one point Graham said "this will determine how I vote for you" before asking whether Winnefeld thought Rouhani is a "moderate." Even setting aside the issue of the substantive validity of what Graham was harping on, why should a military officer's view on this question determine his fitness to serve as vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

Nominees, especially those already serving in the Executive Branch, have somehow to make their responsiveness to questions not run afoul of policies that have already been set by the president, and not to make it seem that they are getting ahead of the president, forcing his hand, or openly criticizing him. And yet senators repeatedly and knowingly put nominees in that difficult position.

At the same hearing last week of the Senate Armed Services Committee, John McCain did so with General Martin Dempsey, nominated for another term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. McCain tenaciously tried to get Dempsey to say that the administration's policy on Syria was one of "inaction."

We should hope that the nation's senior military officer is giving his best advice in private to the president on military aspects of an important problem such as Syria, and we should expect that officer not to offer discordant characterizations of the president's policy in public. We should also hope that senior members of the Senate Armed Services Committee see the job of chairman of the Joint Chiefs in similar terms, regardless of their views about Syria or any other substantive issue.

The inherent vulnerability of nominees makes the confirmation process a vehicle for showing who's boss. This is a form of abuse that goes beyond senators who do the voting, and it gets back to how Power conducted herself. Specifically, it gets to her comments about Israel, which as Rieff puts it were "so stridently one-sided as to be almost wholly indistinguishable from the talking points of Israeli diplomats."

The now well-known background to this is an interview more than a decade ago, in which Power suggested that to quell Israeli-Palestinian violence at that time the United States should consider deploying a large protective force even though

this might mean “alienating a domestic constituency of tremendous political and financial import.” The constituency in question, as is its custom, denounced Power as anti-Israeli.

Power’s later means of retaining her confirmability in the face of such accusations was to disavow, totally and tearfully, her own observations. A key event was a meeting with American Jewish leaders at which, according to the meeting’s organizer, she “became deeply emotional and struggled to complete her presentation as she expressed how deeply such accusations had affected her.”

This sequence has made Samantha Power a more valuable commodity to the Israel lobby than if she had never made any comments to offend the lobby in the first place. Sustaining the lobby’s power depends on repeated demonstrations of submission to that power. The lobby could not have gotten a better demonstration of submission than to have the nominated chief U.S. diplomat at the United Nations abandon all evidence of any independent thought on the issues concerned and to make herself indistinguishable from Israeli diplomats.

Besides making for more dysfunction in the confirmation process, this kind of response from a nominee, as when Power said at her hearing that the United States has “no greater friend in the world” than Israel, badly distorts the larger public discourse on important issues. To appreciate how much it is distorted, we have to listen to distinguished and experienced people who are not up for a confirmation vote, do not expect to be in the future, and thus can voice their observations in an honest and untrimmed manner.

One such person is retired Marine Corps General and former Central Command head James Mattis, who last weekend explained some of the cost to the United States of the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “I paid a military security price every day as a commander of CENTCOM because the Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel,” said Mattis.

Moderate Arabs “who want to be with us,” he said, restrict their support for the United States because they “can’t come out publicly in support of people who don’t want to show respect for the Arab Palestinians.”

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Squeezing Labor Costs Everywhere

The prevalence of low-wage jobs in the private sector and the scarcity of well-organized unions are among the explanations for America's collapsing middle class. But the exploitation of cheap labor also extends into government jobs, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship report.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

And you thought the government didn't have a jobs program. It does. The problem is that the pay and benefits are lousy, and in many cases the working conditions ain't so great either.

We're not talking about the civil service. No, as one of two recent reports notes, "Hundreds of billions of dollars in federal contracts, grants, loans, concession agreements and property leases go to private companies that pay low wages, provide few benefits, and offer employees little opportunity to work their way into the middle class. At the same time, many of these companies are providing their executives with exorbitant compensation."

That's from "Underwriting Bad Jobs," an analysis written by Amy Traub and Robert Hiltonsmith at the public policy and advocacy group Demos. "Our tax dollars are fueling the low-wage economy and exacerbating inequality," they note, whether it's food vendors peddling hot dogs at the National Zoo in Washington, security guards at federal buildings or men and women sewing military uniforms in Kentucky.

Those impacted include healthcare, daycare and construction workers, armored car drivers, janitors and cleaners, prison guards at privately-run jails and gift shop cashiers at national parks, museums and monuments.

The Demos findings are echoed in a second report "Taking the Low Road: How the Federal Government Promotes Poverty-Wage Jobs through Its Contracting Practices" – issued just last week by the National Employment Law Project (NELP), a non-partisan nonprofit that focuses on issues affecting low wage and unemployed workers.

NELP reports that every year the federal government awards private companies half a trillion dollars for contracts for goods and services: "Privatization advocates tell the public that outsourcing government jobs to the private sector is good business and an efficient use of taxpayer dollars. Policymakers argue that when private firms compete for public contracts, market forces will prevail, and the government will get the goods and services it needs at the best

possible prices.

“But in fact, this ‘free market’ system leads to a bookkeeping sleight-of-hand: Low-road contractors pay poverty level wages and provide no benefits for their employees, who then rely on food, housing, healthcare, and childcare subsidies from government agencies. Thus, the real costs of goods and services purchased under federal contracts are hidden, as are the thousands of workers who are trapped within this broken system.”

NELP conducted a survey of 567 of the workers and found that 74 percent earn less than \$10 an hour. Only 26 percent got sick days and just 11 percent received employer-provided healthcare 58 percent report no benefits at all. One in five is falling back on Medicaid for health care and 14 percent say they depend on food stamps.

It’s not supposed to be like this. “These are employees working on behalf of America,” the Demos report notes, “doing jobs that we have decided are worthy of public funding – yet they’re being treated in a very un-American way.”

But as you know, virtually every low-wage worker in America is taking it in the neck, not just those with jobs outsourced by the Feds. Walmart – with revenues last year of nearly \$470 billion dollars – is threatening to abandon plans to build three giant stores in Washington, because the city council insists they pay a living wage of \$12.50 an hour.

Keep in mind that if adjusted for productivity, the federal minimum wage should be almost twice that amount. But Walmart is in a tizzy over the Washington living-wage demands, despite the heirs of founder Sam Walton already socking away almost \$116 billion. You have to ask, how much is enough when no matter what you have is never enough?

Which also brings us to McDonald’s. The fast food giant’s new CEO Don Thompson was just awarded a pay package of nearly \$14 million. Perhaps that helps explain why McDonald’s has set up a website with the credit card company Visa to show its fulltime workers how to get by on the minimum wage it pays, which turns out to be a little over \$1,100 a month.

All you have to do, they say, is get a second job, and not spend any money on food because presumably you can live on the crumbs from Don Thompson’s table. That’s a lot of leftover Chicken McNuggets.

Clearly, the owners of capital are determined to wring even greater wealth from the sweat and sacrifice of workers, deepening our spin into economic inequality until and unless, in solidarity, those workers stand up and demand a fair wage for a hard day’s work.

In Washington, some of them are standing up. On Thursday, July 18, federally subcontracted concessions workers at Union Station briefly walked off the job. It was the third such strike in eight weeks others took place at the Smithsonian and the Ronald Reagan Building organized by the Good Jobs Nation campaign that, according to the *ThinkProgress* website is “pressuring the government to stop paying poverty wages through its private-sector partners.”

The walkout at the Reagan building actually has triggered a Labor Department investigation into whether employers at the building’s food court owe their workers as much as a million dollars in back wages and damages.

It’s a tiny start. But there are two million federally subcontracted jobs out there nationwide and that’s more than McDonald’s and Walmart employ combined. And unlike the appalling situation for workers at those two consumer monoliths and others, President Obama could help solve the problem with a stroke of his pen by signing an executive order demanding a living wage for private employees working on government contracts.

Back in 2010, a year and a month after Barack Obama began his first term, *The New York Times* reported that the White House was “planning to use the government’s enormous buying power to prod private companies to improve wages and benefits for millions of workers.”

Mr. President, what’s holding you up?

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L’Affaire Snowden Shows US Weakness

Exclusive: The U.S. threw its diplomatic weight around getting several European countries to block a plane carrying Bolivia’s President Evo Morales thinking NSA leaker Edward Snowden might be a stowaway but the clumsy affair only spotlighted declining U.S. influence in Latin America, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

It took the Spanish government an inexplicably long time, but it finally

apologized last week to Bolivia for an extremely rare diplomatic faux-pas, denying access to its air space for the presidential plane carrying Bolivian President Evo Morales from an official trip to Russia on July 3.

Spain was acting on information from an undisclosed source that whistleblower Edward Snowden, who revealed global eavesdropping by the United States, was hidden inside the plane. France, Portugal and Italy also denied their air space, but quickly moved to correct the situation. Madrid's denial was more serious, not only because Spain was slow to recant its position but because Bolivia's presidential plane had to refuel in Spain's Canary Islands on its way to South America.

Further adding to the offense, the Spanish ambassador in Austria, where Morales was forced to land, tried to invite himself onboard "for coffee" to inspect the plane. Spain finally apologized and acknowledged that it acted inappropriately, but only after multiple international bodies had condemned the affair.

As we know now, Snowden wasn't on board, and it's hard to explain why anyone would think Bolivia's head of state would risk stowing away Snowden, and even harder to figure out why European governments would deny use of their airspace, treating Morales as if he were a criminal.

The "rumor," as Spain's Foreign Minister Jos Manuel Garca Margallo described it, could only have come from Washington, which is exerting its diplomatic muscle to prevent South American countries from giving Snowden refuge. The Snowden case, as it relates to Latin America, is ultimately anecdotal, of course. It does however illustrate a profound hegemonic transition that is taking place in the region.

The multiple asylum offers Snowden has in Latin America, despite the public and no doubt private threats from the U.S., would have been unthinkable last century. They thus illustrate a new reality, as does the fact that Washington can't do much about it.

The outcry over the blocking of Morales's plane was reasonably monumental. The Organization of American States condemned it, as did South American countries individually. The U.S. and Canada abstained in the OAS, once again isolating themselves from the rest of the hemisphere.

For Spain the former colonial power and, until only a decade ago, the second most influential country in the region after the United States, it was a gross miscalculation especially because of its continuing political and economic ties to Latin America. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Venezuela recalled their ambassadors from the involved European countries to pressure them to correct an

unjustified slap on the face to Bolivia and the rest of South American countries.

A free trade agreement that Europe has been negotiating with the South American Mercosur bloc will be further delayed as mistrust grows. What the U.S. and Spain don't seem to understand is that Latin America can no longer be bullied into submission.

Transition in Latin America

Since Latin America's independence from Spain in the 19th Century, and through most of the last century of U.S. dominance, the region has had basically two hegemonic overlords. However, over the past two decades, Latin America has matured into a powerful region and to varying degrees its countries have shed their politically dependence and economically instability, emerging from an era of dictatorship, war and gross human rights violations.

Latin America's combined economies now are similar to Japan's, about 70 percent of China's, and about a third of the European Union's. Though the region's per capita spending of its nearly 600 million people is closer to that of Eastern Europeans, it is fast approaching developed economies' consumption patterns. Regional economic growth outpaces the U.S., and in Europe's case, especially Spain, by far.

The region also holds an enviable reserve of minerals, land, water and natural resources. A robust middle class is emerging with a rising number of high-income homes. In other words, Latin America is no longer about potential, but about reality. None of this has escaped China, Russia, India, Iran, some European countries and other middleweight powers.

However, the United States has been slower in recognizing this new reality, perhaps partly because it requires a new frame of thinking. Until the 1990s, Latin America was a proxy battlefield of the Cold War between Americans and Soviets, a strategic trophy rather than an investment opportunity. Now, it's a must destination for global leaders trying to make inroads, form alliances and broaden relations with the region.

But the United States has been largely absent during Latin America's formidable coming of age, while Spain has remained arrogant toward its former colonies. As a result, both are being displaced gradually as the region's hegemonic powers by a rising Brazil, which moved ahead of the United Kingdom to become the world's sixth largest economy.

Most Latin American countries hold Brazil as a model. But other countries also have been raising their profiles geopolitically and economically, including

Mexico, Colombia, Chile and Venezuela. That is a diametrically different reality from just two decades ago when the region was still considered “America’s Backyard,” an infamous title it held for almost two centuries and is still used commonly in American policy-making circles.

This profound shift in relations is mostly due to the region’s own political and economic maturity. The U.S. and Spain have not evolved along with the region and their policies remain paternalistic, precisely as Latin American countries grow more assertive. Indeed, the disparate but well rooted Latin America’s coming of age is precisely what the U.S. and Spain, to a certain extent, had hoped for, as opposed to an unstable, economically weak and dependent region.

A New Reality

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. largely refocused its interests elsewhere, especially on the Middle East after the 9/11 attacks. As a result the U.S. gradually lost leverage over much of the continent.

Now, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia are happy to greet Snowden not just to stick it to Washington, but because there is very little the U.S. can do to retaliate in those countries. The U.S. government has few bilateral ties with those countries, and even trade preferences are little incentive. So, Snowden continues to search for a way to reach Latin America from Russia.

Ultimately, the best response for Washington may be for both Republicans and Democrats to rethink their ideological approach toward the region and to regain influence through positive and pragmatic relations, not idle threats. The economy remains the best vehicle to achieve that, not on U.S.-imposed terms, but based on mutual interests.

The nations of Latin America have no intention of ever being the obedient pupil again. The region will continue evolving under Brazil’s leadership and seek its own path, which will be heavily influenced by countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina and Bolivia nations that Washington insists on antagonizing.

As for Spain, its options are even more limited and were damaged by its exposure as a subservient pawn in Washington’s game of capturing Snowden. Much of Spain’s economy derives from its multinational presence in Spanish-speaking Latin America. However, it may soon be the case of Spain’s former colonies helping their ailing European relation.

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On the Death of Helen Thomas

In her long career, Helen Thomas walked a tightrope. She was part of Washington's journalistic club yet an outsider who asked unwelcome questions. When she was tossed out of the club in 2010 over a careless remark about Israel, she said she cried for days and had few defenders. But one was Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Helen Thomas, who died on July 20 at the age of 92, was the first woman journalist to cover the White House and did so for an unprecedented 50 years. She lasted in that job despite always asking the tough questions. It was a glorious run besmirched only late in her career by opportunistic attacks by Zionist American ideologues.

When that happened, as described below, I wrote a piece in her defense on June 23, 2010, which is included here in an updated form:

Helen Thomas was the most respected of the White House press corps. However, she made a mistake the other day of wearing her feelings on her sleeve, so to speak, on a topic of deadly political sensitivity. She said out loud that the Jews should "get the hell out of Palestine" and return to Europe. Palestine is "not German, it's not Polish" she added.

Unfortunately, the whole thing ended up on a YouTube video. Predictably, the American Zionists jumped all over her. Several former White House operatives, who may have resented Thomas's hard questioning of their bosses, were at the front of this charge.

Lanny Davis, former Clinton White House counsel, immediately announced that Thomas should be "stripped of her honors for having crossed the line of freedom of speech." The attempt by supporters of Israel to exempt criticism of the Zionist state from the protections of the First Amendment of the Constitution has been ongoing. Davis added that Thomas "has shown herself to be an anti-Semitic bigot."

Another former White House press secretary, Ari Fleischer, said Thomas should be fired from her post and her White House press credentials revoked. He also called her an anti-Semitic bigot. B'nai B'rith's International President Dennis Glick and Vice President Daniel Mariaschin accused Thomas of being an ally of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and being part of a cabal seeking to "delegitimize Israel."

The way the Israelis behave they have no need of Helen Thomas to “delegitimize” their country. They are doing a fine job of that on their own. Thomas’s remarks came in the aftermath of a piratical attack on the Gaza Aid Flotilla, during which Israeli commandos murdered nine aid activists on the Mavi Marmara.

Acting as they do, the Zionists really have little legitimate cause to get angry at other people’s anger. Thomas’s remarks were obviously made in a mood of anger and frustration. We all make statements during fits of anger most of which, thankfully, do not end up on YouTube.

But we also know that most of the time these statements do not reflect our otherwise realistic and level-headed point of view.

I once heard a respected Middle East historian, delivering a talk at an annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association, say that the world would be a better place if Israel broke off from its geographical position and slid to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Was this man a bigot? No he was not. He was Jewish. And he was not a “self-hater.” However, he was angry.

Thomas offered an apology stating that she regrets the “comments I made last week regarding Israelis and the Palestinians.” There is no doubt that she really does regret it, considering the hot water it put her in. She goes on and says that “they do not reflect my heart-felt belief that peace will come to the Middle East only when all parties recognize the need for mutual respect and tolerance. May that day come soon.”

Given her 50-plus years of honest and penetrating reporting there is no reason to doubt that this last statement represents the sober Helen Thomas – when not confronted with horrific Israeli behavior. The accusations of bigotry and the calls for the ruination of her career are way out of proportion and, when coming from Zionists such as Fleischer, Glick and Mariaschin, they are undoubtedly opportunistic.

Zionist Bigotry

Now, since we are on the topic of bigotry, let’s consider the behavior of the Zionists in this regard. After all if one labels their critics as bigots, one should take a look at the basis for their criticism.

The bitter truth is that Israeli Jews have spent the last 65 years systematically discriminating against Israeli Arabs and, as far as the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories go, they have set up a system of control that smacks of apartheid.

A recent survey of Israeli Jews shows that a good number of them do not want

Palestinians as neighbors or allowed to live in the same apartment blocks as they do. Israel's school textbooks have purposely eradicated the Palestinian history of the place they now call the Jewish state.

This discriminatory environment is promoted by the Israeli government. This is how the Israeli journalist Mya Guarnieri describes the situation: "The continued maltreatment of Palestinians puts every Israeli's freedom at risk on a daily basis. If your government disregards the rule of law, disenfranchises your neighbor and tramples his most basic human rights, how can you expect that your own freedoms will remain intact?"

But freedom in Israel is too often seen as a strictly ethnocentric privilege. This is not to say there are not fair-minded and humane Israeli Jews who know that there is something seriously wrong with the society they live in. There are. They are just a too small minority.

In other words, Israel, as now constituted and operated, is a state of active or passive bigots. That conclusion is based on evidence (evidence backed up by most of the world's human rights organizations, including those in Israel).

That being the case, I assert that Israel today is a racist place and should be transformed from a "Jewish state" to a democratic secular state, a state where all its citizens have equal rights. That does not require all of Israel's Jews to go back to Europe, or to be drowned in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It just requires the destruction of the ideology of Zionism.

If the folks at B'nai B'rith get hold of this I will bet dollars to donuts that they would have conniptions and call me an anti-Semitic bigot. That seems to be the way it goes in our world of double standards.

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