

# American Jews ought to take good look at the GOP

By GEOFFREY A. BERG

**T**WO weeks before he died, I asked my grandfather, 82-year-old Nathan Berg, whether he had ever voted for a Republican. Although barely able to hear, he immediately, without adjusting the volume on his hearing aid or asking me to repeat the question, replied, "no." When I joked that I was under the impression he had voted for Richard Nixon "a couple of times" (in the same election year), I thought he might hit me.

Like many American Jews of his generation, my grandfather was a self-described "yellow dog Democrat" for several reasons. One reason was that he was from Chicago, where even the rich didn't vote Republican. My grandfather explained that for the most part, Jews voted Democratic because of a perceived Democratic commitment to social justice with which Jews identified and which included ardent Zionism, through which Jews themselves found justice.

A few weeks ago (two months following his death), The New York Times published a surprising poll that someone in the Clinton administration seems to have read. The poll showed that most Americans (57 percent), view Israel "favorably." On the other hand, the Palestine Liberation Organization, currently incarnated as the Palestinian Authority and ruling 97 percent of the Palestinians in Judea, Samaria (the West Bank) and Gaza and recognized by the United Nations as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," is viewed unfavorably by 72 percent of those Americans polled.

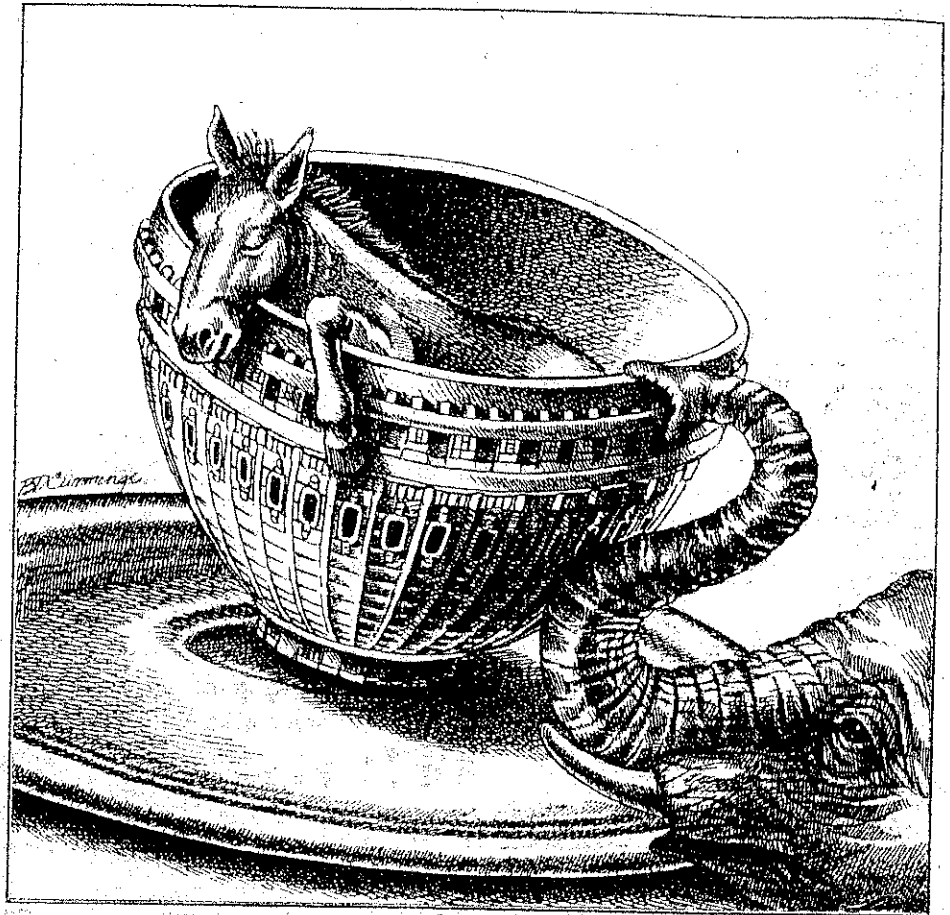
Most surprisingly, however, was that a plurality, 45 percent of Jewish Americans (compared to only 38 percent of Americans as a whole), favor the creation of "a Palestinian homeland in the occupied territories." Such an entity would, by definition, come at the expense of the Jewish state and has long been

seen in Israeli and American policy circles as creating an existential threat to Israel.

On May 5, as the Clinton administration was vigorously and publicly trying to force Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to part with 13.1 percent of the West Bank, Hillary Clinton, the second half of President Clinton's two-for-one team, pronounced that "Palestine" ought to be a state. The rest of the administration feigned surprise at the comment and quickly distanced itself from Mrs. Clinton's remark.

American Jews have supported Bill Clinton through two elections, voting for him in overwhelming numbers both times. Vice President Al Gore covets the same support for his expected run for the presidency in 2000. With Israel under constant threat, the key to American Jewish support has been, for the past 50 years, an expression on the part of a candidate of support for an understanding of Israel. Countless candidates, including Clinton and Gore, have made their way into Jewish neighborhoods, donned yarmulkes and pledged their continuing support for Israel. One of the promises Clinton made was not to pressure Israel into accepting an American formula for peace, an approach widely seen as disrespectful to the sovereignty and dangerous to the security of a staunch democratic ally.

American Jewry's apparent plurality support for the idea of a "Palestinian homeland" has apparently in the eyes of the administration — given the president the cover he may have



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been looking for under which he could bully Israel into giving away more strategic land than it feels it can spare. In trying to force Netanyahu to trade 13 percent of the "West Bank" to Yasser Arafat in exchange for the same promises Arafat has made since 1993 but has yet to keep, the Clinton administration is attempting to exploit the perceived gap between American Jews and Israeli government policy. The Clintons are playing good cop/bad cop, with Hillary in the latter role.

The administration denies that there exists any coordinated strategy at work. This from the same White House which won two elections by working at the pace of each day's news cycle; they know how to send media messages.

The timing of Mrs. Clinton's remarks and President Clinton's frustration with Netanyahu's refusal to accept his dictates is no coincidence. It is meant to signal the Israeli prime minister and his conservative coalition that the United States is on the verge of a new policy (a "re-examination," to use Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's term), with what the president believes to be the blessing of at least 45 percent of American's Jewish community. The message is: Israel can either withdraw from an additional 13.1 percent of West Bank territory (as Arafat and Clinton have demanded) and proceed on to final status talks, or it can wait on Mrs. Clinton's "Palestine" fat accompli.

The Republican Party is presented here with a unique opportunity. Israel has no stronger

supporters in American politics than House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., and U.S. Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss. Gingrich held a news conference last week to denounce administration

attempts to force Israel into accepting its plan for peace. The problem, explained Gingrich, is that Israel lives under constant attack and threat of attack both from conventional war and Palestinian terrorism; that threat is real and should not continue to be overlooked by the administration. Americans, the speaker emphasized, who live in almost total peace and security, shouldn't attempt to dictate what security needs are to Israel, a tiny democratic country which has been repeatedly attacked in wars of attempted extermination over the last 50 years.

Although my grandfather might disagree, Gingrich is no fool. As sincerely as he may hold his pro-Israel views, the fact that Israel advocacy is no longer a Democratic priority is certainly not lost on the speaker: American Jews will not take comfort in Hillary Clinton's statement. Whatever the poll numbers, no one — Jew or gentile — who understands Israeli security concerns and wishes to see the Jewish state survive into the next century and beyond will think the proposal of a state of Palestine by the most powerful and influential first lady in U.S. history does anything except damage Israel's security and undermine Israeli trust in the special relationship between it and the United States.

It wouldn't make Grandpa Nat particularly proud, but Democratic shortsightedness on the Middle East combined with Republican opportunism may help shift traditional Jewish support from left to right.

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