

# Kennedy's Inheritance

*America and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1917–1960*

**I**N NOVEMBER 1953, Eddie Jacobson, a Jewish Kansas City haberdasher who had the good fortune to pick as his business partner a scrappy young man named Harry S. Truman, was asked to introduce his old friend to an audience at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Before an eager crowd at the intellectual home of America's largest Jewish denomination, nestled in Morningside Heights in Manhattan, Jacobson tried to give the former president an introduction that rose to the occasion. "This is the man," Jacobson declared, "who helped create the state of Israel."

"What do you mean, 'helped create'?" asked Truman. With some feeling, he gave his own view of his role: "I am Cyrus. I am Cyrus."<sup>1</sup>

Truman was a self-taught history buff, so it is perhaps unsurprising that he could identify with the ancient Persian monarch who liberated the Jews from their exilic bondage in Babylon. It is also not surprising that he chose in hindsight to romanticize the cutting of a Gordian policy knot. Still, Truman's assessment of his own importance has sometimes come to overshadow the reality of his administration's muddled approach to the Palestine question—and of the muddled and highly contingent American relationship with the young state of Israel. In fact, it had never been as simple as Truman liked to make it sound in retrospect.

America's Middle East policies throughout both world wars and the early Cold War were produced by a complex intersection of interests and actors. Throughout, sympathizers with Zionism had to grapple with opponents convinced that U.S. friendship with a Jewish state would hurt America's posture in the region. Moreover, U.S. Middle East policy was buffeted by wider trends in world politics: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of Nazism in Germany and communism in Russia, the devastation of World War II and the Holocaust, the rise of nationalism

and the fall of the great European empires, the indispensability of oil to Western economies, and the superpower jousting of the Cold War. The instinctive modern assumption of deep and abiding friendship between the United States and Israel rings tinny when one looks back at the presidencies that shaped America's encounter with the Middle East. Those White Houses found Middle East policy-making agonizing, and the policies they produced came not from neat ideological certainties but from painstaking attempts to balance U.S. interests and values.

Not least in importance was the administration of John F. Kennedy, who received a complicated inheritance in the Middle East. Woodrow Wilson bequeathed to Kennedy a liberal emphasis on the importance of nationalism; Franklin Roosevelt dissembled and underscored the importance of Saudi oil; Harry Truman demonstrated the difficulty of integrating support for Israel into U.S. Cold War strategy; and Dwight Eisenhower left a region with American influence on the wane and nationalism on the rise. To understand Kennedy's Middle East policies, we must understand what he inherited.

## THE HOLY LAND AND THE PRIEST

Woodrow Wilson set the stage for America's policies toward the Arab-Israeli conflict—largely by expressing a value-driven American sympathy for nationalism, including the Jewish desire for self-rule. Temperamentally, it is hard to imagine two men farther apart than the gregarious Truman and the priggish Wilson. Still, they did have at least one thing in common: neither thought much of his State Department. Wilson trusted his secretary of state, Robert Lansing, no farther than the president—no Olympic athlete—could throw him. He relied instead on a series of advisers, including his all-purpose fixer, confidant, and occasional alter ego, the omnipresent Colonel Edward House. Wilson relied, too, on several distinguished American Jews who had managed to become establishment fixtures, including Henry Morgenthau—later named ambassador to the Ottoman Empire—and the man Wilson appointed as a Supreme Court justice, Louis Brandeis.

Brandeis was then America's most influential Zionist. To be sure, this was not saying much in absolute terms—the American Zionist movement was, in the century's first decade, something to be sneezed at—but Brandeis's quiet clout was considerable. While Wilson's Princeton milieu was shot through with the anti-Semitism of its day, it seems not to have rubbed off; the president respected Brandeis, who wound up undertaking an array of missions that today would be bizarre tasks for a sitting member of the highest court in the land.<sup>2</sup>

In 1917, the Zionist movement's center of intellectual gravity was located in London, home of Chaim Weizmann, the urbane, dapper chemist turned nationalist who would 31 years later become the ceremonial head of the new Jewish state. Weizmann, with the help of the sympathetic British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, was trying to succeed where even Theodor Herzl had failed: winning the support of a great imperial power for the Zionist enterprise. With the Allies at war with the crumbling Ottoman Empire, Palestine and much of the rest of the Middle East might soon fall into the hands of the British, who might in turn offer a home for Jewish nationalism. By the spring of 1917, with the world still mired in the muck of the Great War's trenches and Britain increasingly eager to enlist the support of world Jewry in hopes of breaking the stalemate, Weizmann was tantalizingly close to winning British patronage—expressed in the form of the famous Balfour Declaration, in which Britain expressed support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. So one of Weizmann's colleagues, James de Rothschild, asked Brandeis a favor: would he sound Wilson out about the idea of a postwar Holy Land that would be both Jewish and under the protection of Great Britain?

Wilson's response was in some doubt. Wilson saw himself as the tribune of a new politics.<sup>3</sup> The Great War's key causes were, as Wilson saw it, essentially European: the Metternich-style system of shifting alliances and balances of power, the jingoistic legacy of warmongering in general and German belligerence in particular, and the disease of imperialism. Instead of the ruinous old statecraft, Wilson proposed disarmament, a system of collective security rooted in the League of Nations, and self-determination for small peoples. That made Rothschild's proposal something less than a perfect Wilsonian fit. On the one hand, the idea of a Jewish national home jibed neatly with the president's push for self-determination. On the other, Jewish self-rule under the aegis of Britain would come in imperialist wrapping. But on May 4, Brandeis lunched at the White House with Wilson and found the president willing to live with that tension—and accept a British protectorate for the Jews in Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

Both Lansing and House objected. The secretary of state pointed out that America was not yet at war with Palestine's Ottoman masters. Moreover, Lansing wrote, "many Christian sects and individuals would undoubtedly resent turning the Holy Land over to the absolute control of the race credited with the death of Christ."<sup>5</sup> Lansing also feared that Wilson's zeal for self-determination would put the United States on a slippery slope and put "ideas into the minds of certain races."<sup>6</sup> In December 1918, Lansing asked, "Will not the Mohammedans of Syria and Palestine and possibly of Morocco and Tripoli rely on [Wilson's promise of self-determination]? How can it be harmonized with Zionism, to which

the president is practically committed? The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite.”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, however, Wilson’s disdain for Lansing kept the State Department out of the loop. Yet House—who often *was* the loop—also urged Wilson to hold off. The colonel fretted that London was plotting some sort of imperialist con game to use Washington to help it snatch up the choice bits of the Turks’ collapsing empire. Nonetheless, Wilson’s attraction to Zionism overrode his suspicion of Britain. The president “was fascinated with the idea that a democratic Zionism might replace Ottoman despotism and create a haven for oppressed Jews in Palestine.”<sup>8</sup> For one thing, the notion appealed to Wilson’s messianic side, which was never terribly repressed. For another, there was a political upside. If he opposed the Balfour Declaration, Wilson risked getting outflanked on both the left and the right: Samuel Gompers’ American Federation of Labor backed Zionism for fear that the alternative was a massive influx of Jewish immigrants, which could flood the U.S. labor market and depress wages; and both the Republicans and Theodore Roosevelt were also tilting toward Zionism. Moreover, some key satellites in Wilson’s orbit—above all Brandeis, but also Rabbi Stephen S. Wise of New York and Brandeis’s protégé, Felix Frankfurter—were also wooing him. Finally, Wilson proved willing to tolerate a continued great-power role in the Middle East, paving the way for the League of Nations Mandates that would place Palestine in British custody and let Britain and France divvy up much of the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, Wilson overruled Lansing and House and told Britain that he would back the Balfour Declaration.<sup>10</sup> In America’s earliest encounter with Zionism, the decision-making circle was actually a dot. The U.S. decision to bless the Balfour Declaration was made by the president alone.<sup>11</sup> As Peter Grose has argued, Wilson’s Zionism was casual and unreflective, rather than the result of a carefully weighed assessment. He followed his idealistic predilections, his chums, and his views of political prudence. “To think,” Wilson mused, “that I, the son of the manse, should be able to help restore the Holy Land to its people.”<sup>12</sup>

## THE JUGGLER

Another American son of the manse played an even more important and complex role during the second part of U.S.–Zionist relations’ early act. Franklin Delano Roosevelt replaced Wilson’s elitism with beaming cheer and a sure common touch. “Above all,” as Isaiah Berlin has noted, “he was absolutely fearless.”<sup>13</sup> Roosevelt was blessed with an invincible certainty

that everything—the shipwreck of capitalism, the rise of fascism and communism, and quite simply the largest and most savage war ever—would turn out all right. When he told the American people that they were entitled to freedom from fear, he was merely inviting them to share in his natural state of mind.

Oliver Wendell Holmes famously reckoned that FDR had a second-rate intellect but a first-rate temperament; as it happened, America's longest-serving president proved far wiler than his foes. Indeed, if the yardstick for intelligence is F. Scott Fitzgerald's proverbial ability to retain opposing ideas simultaneously and still function, Roosevelt's second-rate intellect starts to look more like genius. Nowhere was that clearer than on Palestine, where the man whom the historian Warren Kimball calls "the sly squire of Hyde Park" strewed in his wake the flotsam and jetsam of contradictory promises, commitments, and impressions. FDR stands as a lasting reminder that American sympathy for Zionism came with strings attached—that Wilsonian idealism was not nearly enough in a world of cruel choices and unyielding interests. "You know I am a juggler, and I never let my right hand know what my left hand does," said Roosevelt on May 15, 1942. "I may be entirely inconsistent, and furthermore, I am perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help win the war."<sup>14</sup> So he was; so it did.

If Wilson's response to the Palestine problem was a casual Zionism, FDR's was by turns fanciful, hard-headed, duplicitous, and pragmatic. The common link was that neither man saw Zionism as a front-burner issue. With a shudder at FDR's easygoing improvisation, one key White House aide, David Niles—who would later become one of Zionism's most strategically placed proponents during the Truman administration—noted that there were "serious doubts" in his mind "that Israel would have come into being if Roosevelt had lived."<sup>15</sup>

A staggering 92 percent of U.S. Jews voted to give FDR a fourth term in 1944.<sup>16</sup> In turn, the president made them one of the building blocks of the New Deal coalition. Like Wilson, FDR seems to have been largely unaffected by the anti-Semitism of his class. (The young Eleanor, however, was not above the odd anti-Semitic jibe; and for all his anticolonialism, Roosevelt's correspondence and chats on Middle East affairs betray a less liberal attitude toward Arabs and Muslims, whom he lumped in with the large parts of the planet he assumed to be lamentably backward.) He was annoyed that his domestic reforms were sometimes sneeringly called the "Jew Deal," and many of his best aides were Jewish. As for Palestine itself, FDR's interest was somewhat limited, although he was fascinated with the Holy Land's geography. (En route to the Tehran summit in 1943, he ordered his pilot to swoop over Palestine as he picked out sites below.

“We’ve seen it all, from Beersheva to Dan!” he enthused. “You know this country as though you were raised here,” an adviser commented. “So I do!” Roosevelt replied.)<sup>17</sup> The president, however, was not much of a Zionist. After 1941, his ideology, such as it was, did not extend much farther than doing whatever it took to win the war.

Roosevelt was lobbied more intensively on Palestine than his predecessors. The American Zionist movement grew dramatically after the Great War, even as Zionism’s geopolitical position began eroding. As Nazism rose and as Britain’s Balfour enthusiasm cooled, frosted, and then froze over, America’s Zionists became increasingly worried. The largest mainstream Zionist groups were Hadassah (for women) and Brandeis’s Zionist Organization of America (for men). Their combined membership rose steadily, in some grim symmetry with the rise of Adolf Hitler. In 1935, Hadassah and the ZOA had a total of 50,000 members; in 1939, they had 110,000; in 1945, 280,000; and by the time Israel was born in 1948, fully half a million.<sup>18</sup> For the most part, however, the movement was not a mass one, preferring to leave its lobbying to Roosevelt intimates—particularly Rabbi Stephen Wise, who was a veteran New York Democratic activist and Roosevelt sycophant. More hard-line Zionists preferred Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland, a fiery orator with close ties to Ohio’s Republican Senator Robert A. Taft and scant inclination to shield the administration from his rhetorical wrath.

The Zionists at first sought to win Roosevelt over by using *shtadlanim*, or emissaries, to intercede discreetly on the movement’s behalf, in much the same way Brandeis so effectively nudged Wilson along. It did not go well. In February 1940, FDR met for the first time with Weizmann. “What about the Arabs?” Roosevelt inquired. “Can’t that be settled with a little *baksheesh*?”<sup>19</sup>

Needless to say, it could not. There is no real way of knowing whether FDR appreciated the excruciating intricacy of the Arab-Jewish clash in the British-ruled Palestine Mandate and chose to ignore it, or whether he hoped to glide glibly by the problem. Roosevelt’s instincts were often whimsical; he quite liked the idea of simply moving Palestine’s Arabs to Iraq, and he flirted with a series of exotic alternative locales for a possible Jewish national home—Rhodesia, Kenya, South America’s Orinoco Valley, Tanganyika, and Libya—that made Britain’s turn-of-the-century offer of Uganda seem downright pragmatic by comparison.<sup>20</sup> More to the point, FDR was caught in pitiless constraints. Jarring the U.S. public out of its isolationist habits took all the president’s considerable ingenuity.<sup>21</sup> The fight against Hitler and Tojo left him little running room, and Great Britain—under both the unsympathetic Neville Chamberlain and the friendlier Winston Churchill—was firmly set against further Jewish immigration

into its Palestine Mandate lest this drive the Arabs into the Axis's arms, sever the Allies's oil supplies, and cut India off from its imperial mother. The War and State Departments added that America's Middle Eastern bases could also be threatened.

On the other side of the ledger was an American Zionist lobby that was by turns galvanized and petrified. Under Silver, the movement got out into the streets and cloakrooms, holding rallies and goading Congress into pressuring the administration. Since the Balfour Declaration, the Zionists had clung to the diplomatic ambiguity inherent in the phrase "Jewish national home"; by 1942, they were desperate enough to rip away the shroud and, at New York's Biltmore Hotel, dedicate the movement forthrightly to turning the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) into nothing less than a state.

For their part, Palestine's Arabs were led by the British-appointed mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni. An Axis enthusiast, the mufti fled the Mandate after widespread Arab rioting began in 1936—going to ground in Lebanon, Iraq, and Italy before winding up in Berlin with a British price on his head.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, the situation on the ground in Palestine deteriorated, beginning a depressing cycle wherein Arab riots were followed by British commissions of inquiry whose recommendations were hooted down by at least one and often both of the Mandate's warring ethnic groups. And Churchill, whose imperialism was more consistent than his Zionism, showed no sign of overturning the 1939 White Paper barring Jewish immigration and every sign of wishing the Americans would keep their neo-Wilsonian noses out of his putative postwar empire.

Faced with these opposing demands, Roosevelt beamed goodwill at everyone, overpromised, and improvised. The results were bleakest when it came to the Jewish refugees trying to escape the Holocaust. Since 1939, fearing Arab opposition to Jewish immigration, Britain had barred Palestine's door, and FDR largely went along. Roosevelt's failure to help Europe's Jews elude their Nazi pursuers remains an indelible stain on his presidency, and on his country's conscience.<sup>23</sup> There was little American public enthusiasm for a humane refugee policy, and FDR left America's stingy immigration quotas guarded by the State Department bureaucrat Breckinridge Long, an inveterate anti-Semite. As the historian David Kennedy has noted, "The Depression had helped to reinforce an isolationism of the spirit, a kind of moral numbness, that checked American humanitarianism as tightly as political isolationism straitjacketed American diplomacy."<sup>24</sup> On March 1, 1943, Wise told a rally at Madison Square Garden, "When the historian of the future assembles the black record of our days, he will find two things unbelievable: first, the crime itself; second, the reaction of the world to that crime."<sup>25</sup> When Romania half-

heartedly suggested ransoming 70,000 of its Jews, the State Department killed the proposal because it assumed they would wind up in Palestine, preferring instead to risk having them wind up in Birkenau. Aides to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau caught wind of the subterfuge and drafted a raging memo with the bitterly unbureaucratic title “Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence by This Government in the Murder of the Jews.”<sup>26</sup> Only in the last year of the war did Washington try seriously to stanch the bleeding of European Jewry, but the admirable exertions of the War Refugee Board, founded in January 1945, were simply too late.

## ON GREAT BITTER LAKE

The Roosevelt administration also faced a gap between rhetoric and results on Palestine itself. The Zionists, recognizing that FDR’s plans to house the refugees in the earth’s proverbial vast uninhabited spaces bespoke a president unwilling to override Britain’s determination to keep the refugees out of Palestine, did their best to raise the heat. With little influence over the executive branch, they focused instead on Congress; in 1944, 77 senators and 318 representatives urged FDR to push for Zionism.<sup>27</sup> In that year’s elections, Roosevelt was pressed into promising to support a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine; the next day, he promptly approved the usual State Department blandishments to the Arabs to assure them he meant nothing serious. “Public pro-Zionist statements after pressure balanced by secret assurances to Arab leaders constituted the pattern of the later Roosevelt years,” the political scientist Steven Spiegel has noted. “At the very least, these contradictory promises to the two sides misled both.”<sup>28</sup>

Roosevelt’s Soviet diplomacy has frequently been criticized—especially by foes of Yalta—for relying on charm at the expense of consistency. His Middle East diplomacy sometimes suffered from the same failing. On the way home from Yalta, FDR stopped the U.S.S. *Quincy* near the aptly named Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal to meet with Ibn Saud, the leader of the Persian Gulf’s key oil state, Saudi Arabia. (The ailing president might have had a shorter trip had his original suggestion for a venue for the Big Three summit—Jerusalem—been adopted, but Stalin refused to leave Soviet turf.)<sup>29</sup> Roosevelt hoped to sway Ibn Saud away from his opposition to Jewish statehood and immigration while keeping Saudi oil flowing. For his part, Ibn Saud figured that without U.S. support, the Yishuv was doomed. He was unmoved by FDR’s charm offensive, even though the president, ever a believer in atmospherics, went so far as to sneak away for his habitual cigarettes so as not to offend Ibn Saud’s Wahhabi puritanism. But Ibn Saud had Roosevelt, as it were, over a barrel. The Saudi king

warned Roosevelt that he would not countenance letting more Jews fleeing Nazism enter Palestine. Roosevelt wound up promising not to “adopt a policy hostile to the Arabs.”<sup>30</sup> In March 1945, a visibly exhausted FDR departed from his prepared text during a joint session of Congress to ad lib, “I learned more about the whole problem of Arabia—the Moslems—the Jewish problem—by talking to Ibn Saud for five minutes than I could have learned in the exchange of two or three dozen letters.”<sup>31</sup> This brought the predictable howls of Zionist protest, but at a subsequent meeting, Roosevelt assured Wise that his position had not changed.

The trick, of course, was knowing what that position was. FDR never gave much more than lip service to Zionist pleas and basically sided with the State Department and the British, who argued that caution on Palestine made more sense for the Allies. But Roosevelt never went all the way over to full-blown anti-Zionism, either. His welter of contradictory assurances can be explained quite simply: there was a war on, and Roosevelt had bigger problems. Like so many other issues about the postwar world's disposition, the buck did not stop with him. On April 12, 1945, at about 1:45 P.M., FDR was working at a card table at his “Little White House” in Warm Springs, Georgia, when he was struck by an excruciating headache. The president died two hours later of a cerebral hemorrhage, at the age of 63.

## A HOUSE DIVIDED

Harry S. Truman's 1948 nominating convention was something less than triumphal. Having held the White House since 1932, most Democratic pols were busily bracing themselves to have their winning streak broken by Thomas Dewey, the starchy Republican governor of New York. “I'm Just Mild About Harry,” read one convention placard. Some wags tried to be philosophical about the president's limitations: “To err,” they said, “is Truman.”<sup>32</sup>

On Palestine, that jibe was apt. The Truman administration was a house divided against itself, and the whole farrago gave Truman fits of frustration. The president's initial personal inclinations toward humanitarianism soon were submerged in a riptide of improvisation, intra-administration warfare, and vacillation.

Truman inherited Roosevelt's Palestine legacy: a determined Arab world; a nigh-frantic Zionist lobby; a pro-Zionist Congress; the relentless murder of most of European Jewry; thousands of Jewish displaced persons (DPs) languishing in miserable refugee camps; a strikingly united foreign policy bureaucracy dead-set against Jewish statehood; and firm anti-Zionism for varying reasons from some of America's most important allies, including British Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Ibn Saud.

The way Truman muddled his way through this morass has left scholars divided on his motivations. It has often been alleged that Truman's Palestine decisions were driven by crass ethnic pandering. The accusation that Truman was shilling for Jewish votes was leveled first by Attlee's foreign minister, Ernest Bevin, and most cuttingly by his American counterpart, Secretary of State George Marshall. The whiff of inappropriate politicking at the expense of the national interest has hung over U.S.–Israel relations ever since. The charge is not entirely unfair; only a naïf would deny that Truman and his White House advisers understood the political benefits of a tilt toward Zionism. In 1946, a delegation of U.S. diplomats handling Middle Eastern affairs met with Truman to warn him that coziness with Jewish nationalism was wrecking America's position in the region. "I am sorry, gentlemen," the president replied, "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."<sup>33</sup>

And yet, for all the blatant opportunism of that remark, Truman often resisted the blandishments of the Zionist lobby. His humanitarian impulses and sympathy for the underdog never made him an ideological advocate of Jewish statehood. Virtually all of the pressure from Congress and interest groups pushed Truman to back Zionism; virtually all of the pressure from within his foreign policy bureaucracy pushed him to thwart it. His attempts to find a middle path left almost everyone angry at him. True, his wavering policies and haphazard process drove his anti-Zionist State Department to distraction, but it also drove at least one of his best Jewish friends, Eddie Jacobson, quite literally to tears.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout, Truman never lost sight of considerations of national interest, reality both political and geopolitical, the situation on the ground in Palestine, and the claims of humanitarianism. That is considerably more than can be said of the antagonists warring for the president's ear and mind: the State Department remained frostily unmoved by the misery of the DPs, and Zionist advocates were deaf to the strategic risks Washington would run by backing Jewish statehood. Truman faced an agonizing series of decisions, and while he did not make them elegantly, he made them with considerable common sense and a refreshing lack of rigid ideological prejudices. Even so, in his attempt to thread the needle, he gave his fingers a few good jabs.

## THE WISE MEN

The most important Zionist in the Truman White House was the seemingly omnipresent Clark Clifford, the president's counsel and often the

hub of White House policy-making. Crucially, Clifford worked in the White House itself, not in the foreign policy bureaucracy, which gave him the advantages of access and proximity as well as the drawback of seeming—in a time before the metastasis of the White House staff—as if he was meddling in the diplomats' preserve. From outside came Jewish leaders such as Rabbis Wise and Silver; Zionist emissaries including Weizmann and the de facto Zionist ambassador to Washington, Eliahu Epstein; Truman's old friend Eddie Jacobson, who proved an expert opener of the Oval Office door; and such important public figures as Eleanor Roosevelt and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Against them was arrayed the most formidable bench of foreign policy expertise of the postwar era. Clifford and his allies were up against no less than the Wise Men, the pillars of rectitude who helped create the Cold War world: the nation's first secretary of defense, James Forrestal; two forbidding undersecretaries of state, first the imperious Dean Acheson and then Robert Lovett; Loy Henderson, the head of the State Department's Near East affairs division (known as NEA); George Kennan, the sensitive and brilliant Sovietologist who headed the newly founded Policy Planning Staff; and Secretary of State Marshall himself, the former army chief of staff, nemesis of Nazism, and modern Cincinnatus. (Another diplomat caught up in the drama was the young diplomat heading the State Department's U.N. office, Dean Rusk, Kennedy's future secretary of state.) The foreign policy establishment—and the “e” could well be capitalized—argued that backing a Jewish state could endanger the oil supplies crucial to postwar Europe's recovery, drive the Arabs toward the Soviet Union, and risk rushing U.S. troops to Palestine to save the Jews. “You just don't understand,” Clifford remembers being told by Forrestal. “Forty million Arabs are going to push 400,000 Jews into the sea. And that's all there is to it. Oil—that is the side we ought to be on.”<sup>35</sup>

Truman disliked being pressured by either side. As the historian Michael Cohen has noted, “It is difficult to determine who irritated Truman more—the Zionists or the State Department.”<sup>36</sup> Truman insisted that he was the captive of neither crass domestic politics nor heartless realpolitik. “I don't care about the oil,” he once said. “I want to do what's right.”<sup>37</sup> While his attitudes toward minorities could be more parochial than the urbane Roosevelt's (he once called Jacobson a “smart Hebrew” in a letter to his wife Bess, and in childhood he referred casually to “kikes”), he was no anti-Semite.<sup>38</sup> Truman took it personally when British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin accused him of wanting to let more Jews into Palestine because Americans “did not want too many of them in New York.”<sup>39</sup>

But Truman was also hardly a Zionist partisan. By 1947, Rabbi Silver had so incensed Truman by thumping the president's desk and raising his

voice to the commander in chief that Truman came to hold Silver in roughly the same regard as the radical, rightist Zionist militia known as the Irgun Tzvai Leumi. "Terror and Silver are the causes of some, if not all, of our problems," Truman once complained.<sup>40</sup> The soothing Weizmann had to take over personal contacts with the infuriated president, but Truman's frustration was by no means limited to the overbearing Silver.<sup>41</sup> In 1946, Truman is said to have asked his cabinet, "If Jesus Christ couldn't satisfy them here on earth, how the hell am I supposed to?"<sup>42</sup> During a meeting that year with a congressional delegation from New York, the president interrupted his guests' pro-Zionist presentation. "This is all political," Truman growled. "You are all running for reelection." He was sick, he said, of ethnic demands speaking as parochial blocs rather than simply as "Americans," and kicked the delegation out of his office.<sup>43</sup> Except for its ornery tone, the speech could well have been made by Marshall, Lovett, or Rusk—who, no doubt, would not have been amused by Truman's posture of apolitical propriety.

## REFUGEE ZIONISM

Nevertheless, Truman was troubled by the plight of the DPs, and he at various times scowled at the British, the State Department, and the Zionists for not focusing enough on alleviating their suffering. The historian Michael Cohen has aptly called Truman's approach "refugee Zionism." The president was wedded less to the concept of Jewish statehood than to humanitarianism, and he repeatedly declined to endorse Zionism in its own right.

Truman's refugee Zionism was embodied in a push to let 100,000 DPs into Palestine. The magic figure of 100,000 came from Earl Harrison, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania's law school, who led a mission on the DP problem in April 1945. "To anyone who has visited the concentration camps and who has talked with the despairing survivors," Harrison wrote, "it is nothing short of calamitous to contemplate that the gates of Palestine should be soon closed."<sup>44</sup> Moved, the president promptly made the idea his own.

In 1946, a joint Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine and the DPs called for turning the Mandate over to the United Nations as a first step toward the creation of a "binational" state in which Arabs and Jews would live side by side. To take out some of the sting for the Zionists, the report proposed easing the 1939 White Paper's restrictions on Jewish land purchases and letting in Truman's 100,000 DPs. Truman liked the document enough that in May 1948, by which time the Anglo-American

report had been overtaken by events, he told Judah Magnes, the head of the Hebrew University and a staunch binationalist, that he considered the report a “great document” that he knew almost by heart; Truman showed Magnes his desk copy of it, festooned with tabs to mark off his favorite sections.<sup>45</sup> But the British feared losing both Palestine and Western influence in the Middle East. They played for time by suggesting convening another committee, known as Morrison-Grady, to evaluate the previous committee’s report. Truman liked Morrison-Grady’s principal recommendations: creating a federal Palestine that was neither Arab nor Jewish; carving out two semiautonomous regions within that state, one for each nationalist group; and, with the Arabs’ consent, letting the 100,000 DPs in. The State Department was even more enthusiastic, and neither the White House nor Foggy Bottom minded that the plan did not call for a Jewish state.

But the Arabs refused to give up on the idea of an Arab Palestine. The Zionists also wanted a state of their own, not a canton, but offered to settle for half a loaf: Zionism would now aim to partition the Mandate and establish a Jewish state in its own chunk. Having flirted with two variations on binationalism, Truman gave up. Morrison-Grady was an orphan. On Yom Kippur 1946, Truman tried to preempt Dewey, his presumptive Republican opponent for reelection, by calling yet again for the 100,000 DPs—and formally announcing U.S. support for partition in Palestine.

Truman’s reversal here has not escaped critical notices, including accusations of domestic pandering.<sup>46</sup> But given the recalcitrance of the parties on the ground, Truman’s continued emphasis on the 100,000 made humanitarian sense. The British insistence that they would take the DPs in only after the parties had agreed on Palestine’s ultimate disposition was looking like a diplomatic way of saying “when the cows come home”—since, of course, the parties have still not agreed on Palestine’s ultimate disposition as of this writing, more than five decades later. The case for simply doing something to help the refugees was precisely the sort of uncomplicated, pragmatic solution that appealed to Truman’s temperament, and it is not hard to see why he clung to that life raft of humanitarian simplicity as his Palestine policy floundered in a sea of diplomatic complexity.

London and Washington differed starkly on the 100,000. British hostility toward the Jewish nationalists was hardly cooled when Menachem Begin’s Irgun, the main Revisionist Zionist underground, blew up Britain’s Mandatory headquarters in Jerusalem’s King David Hotel on July 22, 1946, killing 41. But doing something for the DPs need not have necessarily meant political moves toward partition, particularly since the two most important involved powers—Britain and the United States—were united in their dislike of the idea of Jewish statehood.

As the Anglo-American and Morrison-Grady plans circled the drain, Truman's refugee Zionism went with them. Palestine sunk deeper into civil war, and the British tried to convene Arab-Jewish peace talks in London. When the talks collapsed, a frustrated Bevin kicked the problem to the newly founded United Nations on February 14, 1947, winning cheers in the House of Commons when he blamed the failure on U.S. meddling and the Zionist lobby.<sup>47</sup> The world body empaneled a special committee on Palestine known as the U.N. Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which, like Britain's 1937 Peel Commission, urged in August 1947 that the General Assembly split the Mandate into two states, one Jewish, one Arab.<sup>48</sup> (A Security Council vote would have been subject to Soviet veto.) Jerusalem was to remain under international control, and the two states were to be bound together for a decade in an economic union. With the Palestine debate now revolving around partition, the strains within the administration were about to be cast into sharp relief.

## THE POLITICS OF PARTITION

From the start, the Wise Men were dubious about partition. Middle East oil was the lifeblood of the Marshall Plan, without which postwar Western Europe could be left economically devastated and ripe for communist takeover. If a Jewish state was established and the Arabs turned off the spigot, Defense Secretary Forrestal told an oil executive over breakfast, U.S. car makers "would have to design a four-cylinder automobile."<sup>49</sup> Beyond oil, Washington could lose its regional influence, its military access, and the base at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. It would run these risks in the name of a partition scheme that was probably unworkable and likely to exacerbate extremism throughout the Muslim world. Such instability would create opportunities for Moscow. And if a new Jewish state was on the verge of being overrun, Washington might have to intervene to save it. Partition should be quietly spurned, Truman's foreign policy bureaucracy concluded. Some began speaking of deferring the issue and turning the Mandate over to an international trusteeship to run Palestine until things calmed down.

Partition was not Truman's preferred outcome, either, but the UNSCOP plan did appeal to his sense of fair play, and it would do something for the DPs. Moreover, supporters of the fledgling United Nations such as Eleanor Roosevelt—now one of America's U.N. delegates—urged Truman not to undercut the world body by discarding UNSCOP's recommendations. And the very same month that UNSCOP delivered its Solomonic message, American public sympathy was galvanized—along with Truman's

humanitarian instincts—by the plight of the *Exodus*, a ship full of unwanted Holocaust survivors wandering wretchedly from port to port.

On October 13, the Soviets startled the United Nations by announcing that they would back partition. To the State Department's dismay, Truman followed suit. Clifford's White House staff began pulling out all the stops to ram the resolution past the General Assembly. Two U.S. Supreme Court justices and 26 U.S. senators urged the president of the Philippines to back partition, and former secretary of state Henry Stettinius badgered Harvey Firestone, the rubber magnate, into badgering in turn the president of Liberia.<sup>50</sup> The Zionists used up most of their chits in Washington, but partition cleared the General Assembly. With the U.S. government confused and divided, the partition resolution passed on November 29, 1947, with 33 votes in favor, 13 against, and 10 abstentions.

Washington was now formally committed to partition, upon which it had staked the newborn United Nations' prestige. But the civil war in Palestine—a nasty clash of both regular troops and guerrillas, fought out among two overlapping ethnic groups scrunched into close quarters, punctuated by terrorism—was not going well for the Yishuv.<sup>51</sup> The State Department pushed through a U.S. arms embargo on the combatants, which it calculated would reduce the chances of all-out war. But the Arab forces were still resupplied by Britain, leaving the Haganah—the mainstream Zionist militia that would become the nucleus for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—to rely on captured British arms caches, smuggled American arms provided by Zionist sympathizers, and Soviet weaponry shipped through Czechoslovakia. Outgunned, the Yishuv's leader, David Ben-Gurion, asked the United Nations for a police force to enforce partition.

Instead, the State Department proposed a temporary U.N. trusteeship over Palestine to restore order and defer the question of partition. Truman gave an oral green light to trusteeship. He subsequently claimed that he assumed the State Department would check back in more formally with him before implementing the directive; Secretary of State Marshall figured there was no such need.

The Zionists, losing on the battlefield, now feared they were losing ground at the bargaining table, too. Weizmann, who had crossed the Atlantic to lobby the president, found that not even Truman's old friend Eddie Jacobson could win him entry to the Oval Office. Finally, on March 13, Jacobson broke down in the West Wing when Truman unleashed a blast of resentment at him. The startled Jacobson rallied and gave an emotional if implausible speech comparing the debonair Weizmann to Truman's own hero, Andrew Jackson. Truman paused, swiveled in his chair, and gazed out at the Rose Garden. "You win, you bald-headed son of a bitch," he said. "I will see him."<sup>52</sup> Jacobson left the White House,

marched to the closest hotel bar, and gulped back two double bourbons. On March 18, Weizmann met secretly with Truman at the White House, unbeknownst to the Wise Men. He left thinking that the president still backed partition and that the Zionists were back in the game.

The next day, the true degree of confusion in the U.S. policy-making apparatus spilled out into embarrassingly public display. Truman's U.N. ambassador, Warren Austin, told the Security Council that the administration was shelving its support of partition and would push instead to turn Palestine over to the United Nations. The president was fit to be tied. "The State Dept. pulled the rug from under me today," he raged in his diary. "This morning I find that the State Dept. has reversed my Palestine policy. The first I know about it is what I see in the papers! Isn't that hell!" He added, "I am now in the position of a liar and a doublecrosser," and sent a goodwill emissary to assure Weizmann of U.S. support. "There are people on the third and fourth levels of the State Dept. who have always wanted to cut my throat," he scribbled angrily.<sup>53</sup> No other episode so embittered the president against the "striped pants boys," and the resultant bitterness cost the State Department considerable leeway in the Palestine endgame. "I am sorry to say," Truman wrote in his memoirs, "that there were some among [America's Middle East diplomats] who were also inclined to be anti-Semitic."<sup>54</sup> A more likely explanation for the farrago was that Truman, distracted by the worsening situation in Europe, had lost track of the state of play on Palestine.<sup>55</sup>

In April 1948, however, the facts on the ground began to make trusteeship look even less attractive than partition. The battered Haganah rallied, the British left, and the Arab states prepared to invade.<sup>56</sup> With both Arabs and Jews in a confrontational mood, the young Dean Rusk found few U.N. members eager to take charge of Palestine. Forrestal estimated that the American share of the U.N. police force that would have to take control of Palestine would be 50,000 troops, mostly reservists—a deeply unappetizing proposition even without a worsening Cold War and a looming reelection campaign.<sup>57</sup> Truman was souring on trusteeship—which meant a showdown was brewing.

## PRESENT AT THE CREATION

With Ben-Gurion likely to declare independence when the British Mandate expired on May 14, the Truman administration now had to decide whether to recognize the new state. A May 12 meeting to resolve the matter degenerated into an astonishing brawl in the White House.<sup>58</sup> At 4 P.M., with Truman seated at his desk behind his famous "THE BUCK STOPS HERE"

sign, the participants filed into the Oval Office: Secretary of State Marshall, his deputy Lovett, and other State Department officials, squaring off against the presidential counsel Clifford and two other White House staffers.

Clifford, knowing that Marshall resented his presence, waited for the president to invite him to speak. Trusteeship was a nonstarter, Clifford argued. De facto partition on the ground had already occurred. By recognizing the new Jewish state, Washington would both bow to the inevitable and steal a march on Moscow. Moreover, U.S. security would be enhanced by the presence of a democratic friend in the Middle East.

Marshall prided himself on being unemotional (“I have no feelings,” he once told Acheson, “except those I reserve for Mrs. Marshall”), but he went red in the face as Clifford spoke.<sup>59</sup> “Mr. President, I thought this meeting was called to consider an important and complicated problem in foreign policy,” Marshall snapped. “I don’t even know why Clifford is here. He is a domestic adviser, and this is a foreign policy matter.”

“Well, general,” Truman replied, “he’s here because I asked him to be here.”<sup>60</sup>

“These considerations have nothing to do with the issue,” the livid secretary of state said, glaring at Clifford. “I fear that the only reason Clifford is here is that he is pressing a political consideration with regard to this issue. I don’t think politics should play any part in this.”<sup>61</sup>

Lovett, trying to lower the temperature, jumped in. Ben-Gurion’s reliance on Czech weaponry and U.S. intelligence reports of communist infiltration of the Yishuv argued for delay lest the new Jewish state tilt toward Moscow. “Mr. President,” Lovett said, using a singularly unfortunate idiom, “to recognize the Jewish state prematurely would be buying a pig in a poke.”<sup>62</sup>

But Marshall was not done yet, and he jumped in. “If you follow Clifford’s advice,” he told Truman icily, “and in the election I were to vote, I would vote against you.”<sup>63</sup>

The room fell into what Clifford remembers as a dreadful, shocked silence. Marshall was an American icon, and the secretary of state, sitting in the Oval Office, had just accused the president of the United States of being an unworthy hack. The hint of resignation was less than subtle, and Marshall’s departure would enrage the unreconstructed GOP anticommunists in Congress and probably doom Truman’s reelection bid.

That was quite enough, and Truman knew it. He called the meeting to a close by suggesting they all sleep on it and reassuring Marshall that he was leaning his way. In fact, the reverse was true. After the others filed out, Truman told Clifford, “That was rough as a cob.”<sup>64</sup> Marshall not only never spoke to Clifford again, he never even mentioned his name.<sup>65</sup> But the fact that Clifford and Truman were left alone in the Oval Office after the secretary of state and his aides had left gave some sense of where the

administration's true center of gravity lay. "Truman did not know how to deal with the conflicting advice that came to him," notes the Cold War historian Melvyn Leffler. "With little knowledge on which to draw, the new president tended to agree with whomever he was talking to."<sup>66</sup> In May 1948, more often than not, Truman was talking to Clifford.

The May 12 showdown marked the nadir of the Truman administration's Palestine confusion. A conciliatory Lovett, rattled by the clash, called Clifford to invite him over for drinks that night. But from then on, events were in the saddle—and so was Clifford. Over bourbon and sherry, Clifford told Lovett that his presentation had been made on Truman's orders and warned the undersecretary of state that he had better get his chief to back down.

During the final sprint to Israeli independence, Clifford acted as a policy entrepreneur, a persistent loner with the gumption and dedication to outmaneuver a stodgy bureaucracy.<sup>67</sup> At 10 A.M. on May 14 itself, Clifford called Eliahu Epstein, the Yishuv's Washington representative, to ask Epstein to arrange to have the new Jewish state ask for U.S. recognition.<sup>68</sup> Epstein was so rushed that he did not even know the new country's name until he heard it over the radio news in his cab over to the White House; with no time to retype the letter requesting recognition for an unnamed "Jewish State," he crossed those words out and wrote "State of Israel" in by hand as he screeched toward 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.<sup>69</sup> In Tel Aviv, Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence at 6 P.M., Washington time. Truman recognized it at 6:11.

Austin's U.N. delegation was still rounding up votes for a resolution on trusteeship when word of Truman's decision came over the wires. A U.S. diplomat told the General Assembly of Truman's decision by reading off ticker tape pulled from U.N. Secretary-General Trygve Lie's garbage can. This last reversal from the vacillating superpower enraged many U.N. delegates; the Cuban envoy stormed toward the rostrum to announce that his country was pulling out of the United Nations, and he had to be physically restrained by American diplomats.<sup>70</sup> Rusk was told later that one enterprising civil servant actually sat on the Cuban's lap. Still, many of the Cuban emissary's interceptors could empathize. After the vote, Marshall put Rusk on a plane to New York to keep America's U.N. delegation from resigning en masse.<sup>71</sup>

They were not alone in their consternation. When asked later how he got Marshall to go along with Truman's decision, a weary Lovett replied, "I told him it was the president's choice."<sup>72</sup> Some of Marshall's friends who did not see it quite that way urged the secretary of state to quit on principle, Rusk later learned. Marshall is said to have told them "that one did not resign because the President, who had a constitutional right to make a decision, had made one."<sup>73</sup>

In the end, Truman won his 1948 election, and Israel won its 1948 war. The issue receded, especially after war broke out in Korea in 1950. Truman, however, was notably aggravated over Ben-Gurion's refusal to return any land or take back many of the 700,000 or so Palestinians who fled the Arab-Israeli war. Fearing an Arab fifth column, Israel was prepared to offer only to reunite some families and compensate those who had lost their homes.<sup>74</sup> "I am rather disgusted with the manner in which the Jews are approaching the refugee problem," complained Truman, his old humanitarian sympathies again engaged.<sup>75</sup> In 1950, Congress began pressing Truman to sell arms to the Jewish state, but America's reluctant European allies, Britain and France, instead got the administration to join them in the so-called Tripartite Declaration, which demanded limits on arms sales to the Middle East to try to fend off an arms race.

The end of the Truman administration hardly meant the end of arguments about U.S. policy in 1948. Clifford could not have known how durable the charge of election-minded impropriety would prove. But American Jews were not a particularly prominent feature in the Truman campaign's 1948 strategy. In 1948, 65 percent of U.S. Jews lived in New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.<sup>76</sup> Truman carried only Illinois, and even then only barely. Clifford blamed the loss of New York (and Maryland and Michigan, for that matter) not on insufficient Zionist zeal but on the Progressive nominee, former vice president Henry Wallace, who ran to Truman's left. And Truman himself never thought Israel had anything to do with his triumph. "Labor did it," explained the president, who was also the only person in the Truman administration who had thought he stood a chance.<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately, a plausible national security case can be made for Truman's policies, up to and including the still-controversial decision to recognize Israel. For starters, the risk of an oil embargo was probably overstated. The Saudis repeatedly told Truman that they could not afford a conflict with the United States over Palestine. Moreover, 1948 was not 1973. America was not helplessly dependent on foreign oil in the wake of World War II; it imported only 6 percent of its oil, and only 8.3 percent of that came from Saudi Arabia.<sup>78</sup> Even in a worst-case scenario, the oil-related downside of a special relationship with Israel was less dire than the Wise Men's warnings. By 1948, Truman could reasonably bow to the inevitable. Israel was on the way, the State Department was out of alternatives, and the real risk was not that Palestine might be partitioned but that the Soviet Union might somehow make hay out of the resultant chaos. Recognition offered a useful hedge against such a possibility. To be sure, there was a political upside to it, but in the end, Clifford offered a pragmatic president a chance to do well by doing good.

In 1961, Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion traveled to New York, where he met with President Kennedy—and with the young Democrat’s aging predecessor, Truman. Before Truman left Ben-Gurion’s hotel suite, the Israeli leader told him that “as a foreigner I could not judge what would be his place in American history; but his helpfulness to us, his constant sympathy with our aims in Israel, his courageous decision to recognize our new state so quickly and his steadfast support since then had given him an immortal place in Jewish history.” Truman’s eyes welled up, and they were still moist when he took his leave. “I had rarely seen anyone so moved,” Ben-Gurion remembered. “I tried to hold him for a few minutes until he had become more composed, for I recalled that the hotel corridors were full of waiting journalists and photographers.” When Ben-Gurion left the suite shortly thereafter, a reporter asked him, “Why was President Truman in tears when he left you?”<sup>79</sup>

Truman loved such sentimental exaltation of his role in Israel’s birth—but only in retrospect. At the time, his Palestine decision making was more prone to produce tears of frustration than of joy. But most of the elements of America’s special relationship with Israel were laid by the time Truman left office in 1952. Even in these early days, the American attachment to Israel melded an affinity of regimes, the backdrop of the Holocaust, domestic politics, and Cold War realpolitik. But the overall relationship had much less to do with moralism or sentimentality than with diplomacy and the U.S. quest for strategic advantage. The U.S.–Israel relationship would go through its chilliest patch after the GOP triumph in the 1952 elections—a reminder that America’s Middle East policies remained rooted in cold calculations about geopolitics, not warm emotionalism about the bonds between democracies. Truman sometimes spoke as if his most important relationship to independence related to Israel, not Missouri. His nostalgia should not be confused with the historical record. Harry Truman was many things, but he was no Cyrus.

## GENERAL DISDAIN

In October 1956, a troubled IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan flew back to Tel Aviv from a secret meeting in Sèvres, France. The one-eyed Israeli general had been helping cement a conspiracy among Britain, France, and Israel to try to remove Egyptian President Jamal Abd al-Nasser, the increasingly powerful Arab nationalist whom all three either loathed or feared. But Dayan did not trust the Middle East’s erstwhile colonial rulers. He resorted to collusion with them only because he knew no help was forthcoming from the United States. On the flight home, the uneasy Dayan

doodled a cartoon: a dapper Brit and a French woman saying "After you!" as they watch a plucky little Israeli make his way into the Sinai Desert.<sup>80</sup> Uncle Sam was nowhere to be seen.

The 1950s were a decade of strange bedfellows in the Middle East, and few were stranger than the Israelis, their former and thoroughly unloved British masters, and the region's other major imperial power, the French. Wandering into the Sinai beneath the gaze of France and Britain, as Dayan's doodle had it, was not at all what Israel had hoped for. After the Jewish state briefly but frighteningly flirted with nonalignment shortly after independence, Ben-Gurion and his ruling Mapai Party had resolved never again to be without the support of a Western great power, and their overwhelming preference was the United States. But the United States was under new management, and the reservations U.S. foreign policy elites had held during the Truman period about the wisdom of warm ties to Israel now found a receptive ear in both the Oval Office and the State Department. Americans liked Ike, as the campaign jingle had it, because "Ike was easy to like." But Ike did not find it easy to like Israel.

Unlike Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower had no hesitations whatsoever about his foreign policy competence. Nor did one of America's more powerful secretaries of state, the former Dewey adviser John Foster Dulles. Both thought Israel a headache that would make it harder to box up communism in the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This would make the Eisenhower era the coldest period in the entire U.S.–Israel relationship—a relationship that was now devoid not only of the warm overlays and chaotic policy reverses of the Truman period but also of any reasonable prospect for an upgrade to a full-blown alliance.

Indeed, the only remotely comparable frosts came under Jimmy Carter (with his sometimes ill-disguised preference for the debonair Anwar al-Sadat over the quarrelsome Menachem Begin); Ronald Reagan (with his brief fit of anger with Begin over the 1982 sacking of West Beirut); George H. W. Bush (who discovered that Yitzhak Shamir's Israel did not make it appreciably easier to hold together his 1990–91 anti-Iraq coalition); and Bill Clinton (who, notwithstanding his fondness for Israel, loathed Binyamin Netanyahu with an intensity roughly comparable to the way Harry Truman might have felt about Abba Hillel Silver's becoming Israel's prime minister). All these interludes, however, differed from the Eisenhower period in both kind and context. These were squabbles between a junior and a senior partner, between client and proxy, between ally and ally. America's basic bond with Israel—as expressed in massive foreign aid, arms sales, security guarantees, general underlying coordination or cooperation on regional strategy, political support, a protective veto in the U.N. Security Council, sentimental rhetoric, congressional

ardor, a healthy respect for the Israel lobby, and more—was never seriously challenged. Under Ike, all these leading indicators were up for grabs. “It is difficult,” Steven L. Spiegel has argued, “to conceive of two American administrations more different in handling the Arab-Israeli dispute than those of Truman and Eisenhower.”<sup>81</sup>

Ike’s early attitudes toward Zionism were hardly unsympathetic, but the future president was never as susceptible as Truman to Jewish nationalism’s emotional appeal. Nor was he willing to surrender his own independent strategic and tactical judgments about Zionist or Israeli moves. Unlike his insecure and inexperienced predecessor, the seasoned and confident former supreme allied commander in Europe could draw on an almost unmatched wealth of military and foreign policy experience. His wartime experiences left him with a lasting horror at the Nazis’ handiwork. But he was also less than enthusiastic about Zionist braggadocio. In 1956, with the Suez cataclysm brewing, Eisenhower mused in his diary about an encounter he had had while army chief of staff with “a couple of young Israelites [*sic*] who were anxious to secure arms for Israel” in the run-up to 1948. Ike tried to talk strategy with the pair, but they “belittled the Arabs in every way,” deriding “their laziness, shiftlessness, lack of spirit, and low morale.” The Haganah envoys “boastfully claimed that Israel needed nothing but a few defensive arms and they would take care of themselves forever and without help of any kind from the United States.” Ike tried to dissuade them. Having spoken to “many Arab leaders,” he could assure the young Jews that “they were stirring up a hornet’s nest and if they could solve the initial question peacefully and without doing unnecessary violence to the self-respect and interests of the Arabs, they would profit immeasurably in the long run.” Before getting back to the *Sturm und Drang* of 1956, Eisenhower added, “I would like to see those young Israelites today.”<sup>82</sup>

Ike might not have had much of a handle on what to call inhabitants of Israel (which, of course, did not yet exist at the time of his chat with the cocky “Israelites”). But no president since Ulysses S. Grant could speak with more authority on warfare and its requirements. Ike may have thought in 1947 that Israel would need U.S. help, but once in the White House, he refused to make the United States an Israeli arms conduit. When Eisenhower made up his mind about what a would-be U.S. ally needed for its defense, there was no court of appeal.

When Eisenhower left office in 1960, replaced by the dashing Kennedy, he was generally held in poor odor by pundits and presidential scholars—dismissed as a passive, dim, inarticulate, affable steward of national drift. (In 1960, James Reston of *The New York Times* wrote a column in which he rated past presidents in a chat with a fictional friend. “What about

Eisenhower?" Reston asked his interlocutor. "Wasn't he President?" The friend replied, "We must await the judgment of history on that."<sup>83</sup> Since then, his star has steadily risen. Such "Eisenhower revisionists" as Fred I. Greenstein and Robert A. Divine have convincingly given the lie to the hoary charge that Secretary of State Dulles actually ran U.S. foreign policy for a doddering president. The old joke was that Dulles carried America's diplomacy around in his hat. But as the Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis notes, "Dulles never enjoyed the virtually free hand in foreign affairs that Truman had accorded Acheson after 1949."<sup>84</sup> Increasingly, Ike has emerged as a sharp, canny pol as well as an able crisis manager and nimble executive. Eisenhower replaced Truman's "THE BUCK STOPS HERE" sign with a desk-top credo of his own: "*Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*" — Latin for "Gentle in manner, strong in deed."<sup>85</sup>

## THE NEW LOOK

Ike's overall foreign policy—known as the New Look—sought the maximum deterrence of communism for the minimum cost.<sup>86</sup> Ike and (especially) Dulles saw communism—Soviet, Chinese, or Third World—as monolithic, tactically subtle, and above all driven and shaped by Marxist ideology. The most hair-raising part of their strategy was the deliberately vague term "massive retaliation," the veiled threat to use the bomb like any other weapon and thereby deter the communists from aggression. Another hallmark of the New Look was an expanded use of covert operations, including coups, which were also seen as a way of buying security on the cheap (a perspective not entirely shared by many Iranians and Guatemalans).

In practice, the New Look proved more nimble and restrained than Dulles's florid oratory often implied.<sup>87</sup> Unlike Kennedy, for instance, Ike stayed cool about the Soviet launch of Sputnik and the subsequent U.S. fears about a nonexistent ballistic missile gap. The New Look's accomplishments included the end of the Korean War, a refusal to pull France's chestnuts out of the fire after Dien Bien Phu, and a general flair for de-escalation.

The New Look emphasized alliances. In 1954, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Dulles called regional partnerships "the cornerstone of security for the free nations."<sup>88</sup> While the Truman administration sought to use alliances both to create "a preponderance of power" and to enhance its ability to fight a world war against communism, the New Look saw them as stabilizing deterrents designed less to defeat communism on the battlefield than to keep it out of the area in the first place.<sup>89</sup> Dulles hoped "to

encircle the Soviet Union and China with a ring of states aligned with the United States . . . not with any expectation that the countries involved could contribute directly to the defense of the United States, but rather with the hope that an American security ‘umbrella’ over them would discourage Russian or Chinese attacks.”<sup>90</sup> Dulles’s unprecedented 1953 trip to the Middle East showed a secretary of state eager to add a Levantine link to the containment chain. The new emphasis on regional alliances—which led some of Dulles’s critics to accuse him of “pactomania”—helps explain the frostier tone of U.S.–Israel relations under Ike. The Arab-Israeli conflict repeatedly complicated the attempt to build a Middle East defense structure and led to the greatest crisis of Ike’s presidency.

At least some of the new tone had to do with the simple fact that Eisenhower was a Republican. American Jews were a key part of the political equation of the New Deal, but they were much less important to the New Look. As one of Dewey’s foreign policy advisers, Dulles himself had been involved with the New York governor’s criticism of Truman’s Palestine policy, which helped inject the issue into the 1948 campaign. But Ike and his team took pride in casting themselves as impervious to the parochial pulls of ethnic interest groups. In all fairness, talk here was cheap. Zionism’s main backers in the 1950s included liberals, organized labor, and Jews—none of them groups heretofore known as Republican hotbeds.

Israel did retain considerable support in Congress, and Eisenhower’s new evenhandedness between Arabs and Israelis became an issue in the 1954 congressional elections. Eisenhower could never totally ignore the Israel lobby. But paying attention did not mean paying heed. The Israel lobby achieved none of its major objectives during the Eisenhower years: muting the overall emphasis on regional alliances, convincing the government to sell U.S. arms to Israel, and signing a U.S.–Israel defense pact.<sup>91</sup> In October 1956, with the Suez crisis raging, Dulles called Vice President Richard Nixon to check in with the GOP’s right flank. “How do you analyze it politically?” Nixon asked the secretary of state. “You are the political expert,” replied Dulles. The vice president was sanguine. “We will lose some Israeli votes,” Nixon said, but both men agreed that Israel’s partisans would vote Democratic anyway.<sup>92</sup> Similar sentiments were voiced with considerably less delicacy by Secretary of State James A. Baker III in 1992.<sup>93</sup>

Along with this sense of political distance came a sense of wariness about Israeli motives. “It would be easy if the situation were all black and white, but it’s not,” argued one State Department official in 1955. “Extremists in Israel would like to expand their present boundaries. Arab extremists would still like to drive the million and a half Israelis into the sea.”<sup>94</sup> The Eisenhower administration also disapproved of Israeli attempts to handle cross-border attacks—launched by Palestinian militants known

as fedayeen—by launching reprisals that held the host country (in the 1950s, usually Jordan or Egypt) responsible for attacks staged from its soil. On March 28, 1954, one such IDF raid on the Jordanian village of Nahalin killed 9 and wounded 19 civilians. In response, Henry Byroade, Dulles's assistant secretary of state for NEA, warned that Israel should “drop the attitude of conqueror and the conviction that force and a policy of retaliatory killings is the only policy that your neighbors will understand. You should make your deeds correspond to your frequent utterances of the desire for peace.”<sup>95</sup>

The administration also worried that Ben-Gurion's program of *kibbutz galuyot*—the ingathering of Jews from the Diaspora, one of the key ideological principles of Zionism—would tempt Israel into expansionism. On October 29, 1953, an internal State Department report concluded that unlimited Jewish immigration to Israel had ominous implications: “This unrealistic approach can only lead to further economic and financial difficulties and will probably result in additional pressure to expand Israel's frontiers into the rich lands of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, and northward into the settled lands of Syria.”<sup>96</sup> At NEA, Byroade concurred. The Arabs “should have the right to know the magnitude of this new state,” he said in 1954. “Their fears are enhanced by the knowledge that the only limitation imposed by statute on immigration into Israel is, in fact, the total number of those of the Jewish faith in the entire world. They see only one result—future attempt at territorial expansion—and hence warfare of serious proportion.”<sup>97</sup>

## A WHOLE NEW WORLD

The Eisenhower administration's empathy with Arab concerns about Israel's character was hardly accidental. It saw the Arab-Israeli dispute—along with grumbles over British imperialism, especially in Egypt—as one of the primary hurdles to a pro-American Arab world. In 1953, Dulles complained that the Truman administration had “gone overboard in favor of Israel.”<sup>98</sup> He and his boss were determined to right that balance, and then some, by demonstratively rebuffing the Israelis on reprisals, arms sales, and aid requests. In 1953, the Israelis got their first taste of tough love after the U.N. Truce Supervision Organization asked Israel to stop diverting the Jordan River's waters toward a new hydroelectric project. When the Israelis balked, the administration promptly cut off U.S. aid, which resumed after Israel backed down. As the Eisenhower administration saw it, keeping the Soviets out of the Middle East mandated an impartial, friendly attitude to both sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict. But some Middle Eastern

states were more equal than others. As Spiegel has noted, “Impartiality did not mean equality: to Eisenhower the Arabs offered assets, while Israel constituted a liability to American interests.”<sup>99</sup> Put another way, friendship with the Arab states was useful for containment, while friendship with Israel was not.

This new way of viewing the Middle East soon made itself felt. The most powerful Arab states, Iraq and Egypt, found themselves rivals for Arab leadership after a coup led by Nasser’s Free Officers toppled the Egyptian king, Faruq, in July 1952. The State Department was split between proponents of warmer ties to the conservative monarchies—especially Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the latter country then run by the pro-Western King Faysal ibn Ghazi and his prime minister, Nuri al-Said—and those who hoped to do business with progressive nationalists like Nasser. The New Look’s emphasis on alliances also led Eisenhower to improve ties with Turkey, which he hoped might become the bulwark of a miniature NATO on the Soviets’ southern flank.

But Washington was not the only major Western power in the region. The United States saw Britain’s imperial ties to the region as a Cold War asset but worried about Arab resentment and the vacuum that could be left by Britain’s postwar exhaustion.<sup>100</sup> In 1955, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden established the Baghdad Pact—a new, pro-Western alliance in the Near East rooted in Britain’s favorite regional client, Iraq. At its apogee, the Baghdad Pact’s membership included Britain, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey—with Nasserite Egypt, Iraq’s chief rival, conspicuously absent. Iraq argued that the Arabs’ greatest foe was the Soviet Union; Nasser argued that it was Israel and sulked from the sidelines.<sup>101</sup>

Not wanting to alienate Nasser by identifying the United States with both Egypt’s main Arab rival and its erstwhile colonial overlord, Eisenhower kept the United States out of the Baghdad Pact. But the damage to U.S.–Egyptian relations was already done. Nasser felt that he was being drubbed on several fronts: the Baghdad Pact had been signed, the United States would not sell him arms, and France was livid at him for his support for the anticolonialist Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) rebels in Algeria. Moreover, Egypt repeatedly found itself on the receiving end of Israeli reprisals, including a February 28 raid on the Gaza Strip that killed 36 soldiers and 2 civilians and that Nasser saw as proof of Ben-Gurion’s determination to keep Egypt cowed.<sup>102</sup> On June 1, 1955, Nasser warned Byroade that if he could not get weapons from Washington, he would get them elsewhere.

Nasser proved as good as his word. On September 27, the Egyptian president announced that he had turned to Czechoslovakia for arms, starting a strategic tilt toward Moscow that would not end until the 1970s. A

flurry of last-minute U.S. diplomacy—which was not helped when Eisenhower suffered a high-fatal heart attack—came too late. Moscow offered MiG-15 fighters, Ilyushin Il-28 bombers, and T-34 tanks; Washington offered underwhelming aid packages and cultural exchanges, the latter of which Nasser dismissed as “[a] troupe of jazz musicians.”<sup>103</sup>

Frustrated, the administration continued to blame Israel. “We are in the present jam,” Dulles said a month after the Czech arms deal, “because the past administration had always dealt with the Middle East from a political standpoint and had tried to meet the wishes of the Zionists in this country.”<sup>104</sup>

In the run-up to Nasser’s surprise tilt toward Moscow, Eden, Ike, and Dulles had tried to ease Arab-Israeli tension—and thus their regional dilemmas—by pushing the so-called Alpha peace plan that Dulles described before the Council on Foreign Relations on August 28, 1955. Alpha called for major Israeli territorial concessions (including rejiggering borders, cutting the country in two to provide a “kissing point” between Jordan and Egypt in the Negev, and splitting sovereignty over a demilitarized Jerusalem with Jordan); demilitarized border zones; repatriation of 750,000 of the 1948 refugees; international supervision of Jerusalem’s holy sites; a Suez Canal open to Israeli shipping; and an end to the Arab economic boycott, all accompanied by international guarantees to soothe Israeli anxieties.<sup>105</sup> The overambitious scheme suffered “from terminal deficiencies of realism and judgment,” as the historian David Schoenbaum has dryly put it, “but there was no denying it a certain wrongheaded dash and boldness.”<sup>106</sup> It promptly died. A subsequent peace shuttle between Cairo and Jerusalem by Robert Anderson, an Eisenhower confidant and former high-ranking Pentagon official, withered just as quickly.<sup>107</sup>

A series of Nasserite snubs to the West made matters worse. They included recognizing Maoist China, hosting the Soviet foreign minister, continuing to back the Algerian rebels, and egging on Nasserite radicals in Jordan. In response, Eisenhower started a secret new initiative known as the Omega Plan, designed to drive Nasser away from the Soviet Union and isolate Egypt within the Arab world until it took a more tractable stance. In case diplomacy failed, Omega also included one of the hallmarks of the New Look, “the option of a covert operation resembling the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup in Iran.”<sup>108</sup>

Eisenhower also tried one last carrot along with the sticks: an appeal to Nasser’s enthusiasm for modernization. His vehicle was the Aswan High Dam—a massive project to redirect the waters of the Upper Nile, create more arable land, and double Egypt’s production of hydroelectric power.<sup>109</sup> Funding it was proving difficult; the Kremlin feared that the plan would prove a money pit, and Nasser was not keen to make himself dependent

on Moscow. So in December 1955, Eisenhower and Eden offered to help finance this symbol par excellence of Nasserite development.

Suspicious of both superpowers, Nasser responded coolly. Meanwhile, anti-Nasser officials within the administration protested. So did the Israel lobby and, more importantly, American southerners who did not want to have to compete with Egypt's cotton farmers. The general chill of the Cold War had made major aid to the nonaligned Nasser a tough sell among anticommunist congressmen, particularly for a project that might be too ambitious for Egypt to finish.<sup>110</sup> Beset by second thoughts, Ike hoped to let the matter quietly drop, but Egypt's pro-American envoy to Washington, Ahmad Husayn, unexpectedly managed to persuade Nasser to accept the offer and give the United States another chance. But Eisenhower and Dulles decided to rescind the dam's financing. On July 19, 1956, Dulles broke the bad news to the devastated Husayn, who asked repeatedly whether the decision was final.<sup>111</sup> It was. So, for all intents and purposes, was the U.S.–Egypt rift. Reluctantly, Moscow eventually stepped in, ultimately financing at least a third of the project.

A furious Nasser saw the Aswan snub as an attempt to topple him. Determined to find another way to fund the dam, he dramatically nationalized the Suez Canal Company, heretofore owned by the British and French, on July 26, 1956. Britain and France were incensed. The West could not live with Nasser's "thumb on our windpipe," Eden declared.<sup>112</sup>

In Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion felt the same way. He feared that the 1955 Czech arms deal would upend the regional balance of power, eroding Israel's qualitative military advantage and triggering a deadly round of border fighting. Moreover, Egypt was blockading the strategically crucial Straits of Tiran, cutting off Israeli shipping. Israel faced no greater strategic threat than Nasser. France was offering the Jewish state major arms sales, while the British officials whom Israel had expelled just eight years earlier murmured about their support. So Ben-Gurion, stalemated in his attempts to forge a closer relationship with the Eisenhower administration, turned instead to the only Western great powers at hand.

## THE THREE MUSKETEERS

Neither Britain nor France had much sympathy for uppity nationalists. Both governments, still fresh from the searing experience of World War II, were prone to likening Colonel Nasser (as Eden insisted on calling him) to Corporal Hitler. Eden's chancellor of the exchequer, Harold Macmillan, the British cabinet's foremost hawk, was described by the Tory stalwart Brendan Bracken as bellicose "beyond all description," a man

eager “to tear Nasser’s scalp off with his fingernails.”<sup>113</sup> But Britain’s dislike for Nasser paled by comparison to France’s. In particular, France was influenced by the “Munich syndrome,” but it also blamed Nasser for the nationalist rebellion raging in the French colony of Algeria.<sup>114</sup>

French Prime Minister Guy Mollet convinced Eden that Nasser had to go, but he could not convince Eisenhower. The Eisenhower administration had also had a bellyful of Nasser, but it did not want the empires to strike back. France’s activism contrasted sharply with Britain’s procrastination and America’s prudence. The United States repeatedly and forcefully warned against use of force.<sup>115</sup> Israel had little to do with Eisenhower’s reluctance to try to drive Nasser out. Rather, he feared that gunboat diplomacy could open the Arab world to the Soviets.<sup>116</sup> Better, Ike figured, to find a *modus vivendi* with Nasser than to try to get rid of him by force and risk alienating most of the Middle East. But as Henry Kissinger has noted, “once Eden and Mollet had nailed their flag to the anti-appeasement mast” and likened Nasser to Hitler and Mussolini, “they had moved beyond the possibility of compromise.”<sup>117</sup>

For a time, American prudence seemed to have the upper hand. But even as Britain and France sat in at two multinational conferences of Suez Canal-using nations, they began planning to topple Nasser. In the absence of American backing, Ben-Gurion reckoned that he had to follow France’s lead for fear of endangering his new arms pipeline.<sup>118</sup> The downside, of course, was the taint of collusion with the Middle East’s erstwhile imperial overlords. But Ben-Gurion figured that Israel was already branded throughout the Arab world as a colonial implant, and the prospect of aid from a great power was hard to resist.

Britain and France were convinced that America would stand aside. “I know Ike,” said Macmillan. “Ike will lie doggo.”<sup>119</sup> But if Eden, Mollet, and Ben-Gurion were willing to run the risks of a Soviet response, Ike was not.<sup>120</sup>

On October 22–24, Britain, France, and Israel met at Sèvres, France, to seal the terms of Operation Musketeer, a complicated scheme to provide Britain and France with a pretext to attack Nasser. The unlikely comrades decided to have Israel invade the Sinai, which would let France and Britain demand that the fighting stop and drop paratroopers onto the Suez Canal, supposedly to keep it safe from the very fighting they had fomented. Meanwhile, Israeli troops would batter Egypt’s army and forcibly reopen the Straits of Tiran. On October 27, Ike—who found himself in the hospital for a pre-election checkup—sensed a crisis brewing. To a visiting aide, Eisenhower cracked, “Israel and barium make quite a combination.”<sup>121</sup>

On October 29, 1956, the second Arab-Israeli war began as Israeli paratroopers and tanks moved into Sinai. Preoccupied with the final days of Eisenhower’s reelection campaign and the mounting threat of a crackdown

on anti-Soviet demonstrators in Hungary, the administration was caught by surprise.<sup>122</sup> The night before the invasion, a hapless Dulles was reduced to calling the chairman of the American establishment, John J. McCloy, at an ungodly hour and asking him “to call the heads of every major bank to determine if there was an unexpectedly large flow of funds to Europe or Israel that might signal a buildup for war.”<sup>123</sup>

Once the war was on, however, American reaction was blunt. Eisenhower snapped that the three Musketeers could go “boil in their own oil, so to speak.” When Britain and France issued their “ultimatum” demanding that Israel withdraw, Dulles called the ruse “about as crude and brutal as anything [I have] ever seen.”<sup>124</sup> On October 31, Israel’s collaborators began their attack on Egypt. “Bombs, by God,” Eisenhower roared. “What does Anthony think he’s doing?” Meanwhile, Eisenhower hammered the vulnerable British pound, refusing to prop up the dwindling British reserves of oil and currency.<sup>125</sup> When he got Eden on the phone, Ike dressed down the United States’s closest ally angrily enough to leave the British prime minister in tears.<sup>126</sup> He was no gentler to the Israelis, warning them that they risked U.N. opprobrium, Soviet attack, and the termination of all U.S. aid. Eisenhower directed Dulles to tell Ben-Gurion that “goddam it, we’re going to apply sanctions, we’re going to the United Nations, we’re going to do everything that there is so we can stop this thing.”<sup>127</sup>

Ike promptly suspended much of America’s aid to Israel. Britain and France vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution demanding a ceasefire, so the administration took the fight to the U.N. General Assembly, which overwhelmingly called for a halt to the fighting—with the approval of the Soviet Union, which was busily crushing Imre Nagy’s neutralists in Hungary. The administration’s misery was made complete when Dulles, wrung out after his exertions at the United Nations, awoke the night of November 2 with excruciating abdominal pains. The secretary of state was sped to Walter Reed Hospital, where he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Eisenhower was alone at the helm, then, when the Soviet Union’s Nikolai Bulganin warned on November 5 that Moscow might fire missiles into London and Paris if they did not stop the war. Ike’s second electoral showdown with Adlai Stevenson paled by comparison. The president warned that any such Soviet attack could mean World War III.

Finally, Eden’s nerve broke. The Commonwealth and his allies at home were deserting him; his bitterly disillusioned protégé and minister of state for foreign affairs, Anthony Nutting, wrote that Britain had taken “part in a cynical act of aggression, dressing ourselves for the part as firemen or policemen, while making sure that our fire-hoses spouted petrol and not water and that we belaboured with our truncheons the assaulted and not the assaulter.”<sup>128</sup> But the British prime minister’s collapse stemmed both

from Soviet bluster and American sanctions; even the bellicose Macmillan abruptly changed his tune after the Bank of England began hemorrhaging. Broken, Eden told Mollet it was all over. After ordering his tommies to pull back, Eden called Eisenhower on November 6—election day—to tell him that he need not find out whether Moscow was bluffing about reducing Big Ben to radioactive rubble. With British good manners, Eden also took the time to ask how the vote was going. “I don’t give a darn about the election,” growled Eisenhower. “I guess it will be all right.”<sup>129</sup>

So it was, but Ike’s Suez performance remains an impressive display of political sangfroid. The risks that Eisenhower ran had little to do with the Israel lobby; American Jews would vote loyally for Stevenson. “I gave strict orders to the State Department,” Eisenhower told a friend during the crisis, “that they should inform Israel that we would handle our affairs exactly as though we didn’t have a Jew in America.”<sup>130</sup> The stickier political problem was Eisenhower’s own party’s right flank. Before Suez, GOP hardliners were livid over Nasser’s recognition of communist China and acceptance of Soviet arms.<sup>131</sup> Ike did not much care if they were angry at him for saving Nasser. “If they don’t want me,” he said, “let them get someone else.”<sup>132</sup>

## THE EISENHOWER DOCTRINE

As 1957 dawned, Britain and France were long gone from Suez, but Israel still held the Gaza Strip and positions in Sinai overlooking the Straits of Tiran. Eisenhower wanted them out; with anti-Israel economic sanctions wending their way through the United Nations, Eisenhower gave a nationally televised speech demanding an Israeli withdrawal. Dulles trumpeted the administration’s immunity to the Israel lobby. “We are doing all we can to avoid sanctions,” Dulles griped to *Time’s* Henry Luce. “I am aware how almost impossible it is in this country to carry out a foreign policy not approved by the Jews. Marshall and Forrestal learned that. I am going to try to have one.”<sup>133</sup> By the end of the month, Canadian Foreign Minister Lester B. Pearson took pride of authorship for a package deal: an Israeli retreat from Gaza and its positions athwart the Straits of Tiran, a U.N. peacekeeping force in the Sinai, and U.S. guarantees of “unrestricted navigation in the Straits.”<sup>134</sup> On March 7, the IDF began pulling out of Gaza and Sharm al-Shaykh; on April 10, the Suez Canal reopened.

Surveying the wreckage, Eisenhower and Dulles found little to like. The British-backed Baghdad Pact, never a huge success, was now thoroughly disgraced across the Arab world. Worse, the British and French had left behind a political vacuum in the Middle East. To fill it, on January 5, 1957, the president unveiled to Congress what would become known

as the Eisenhower Doctrine: arms sales, military assistance, and foreign aid to friendly Middle East states, as well as a commitment to use force “to protect the territorial integrity and political independence of any Middle Eastern state facing overt armed aggression from a country controlled by international Communism.”<sup>135</sup>

In practice, the Eisenhower Doctrine came to mean a concerted American attempt to bolster the Arab forces most likely to resist communism—the conservative monarchies, who were also the Arab forces most likely to resist progressivism, neutralism, nationalism, and pan-Arabism. Increasingly, Washington saw Nasser as a communist stalking horse and a threat to regional order.

The United States was rattled when Syria joined Egypt in 1958 to form the United Arab Republic (UAR), a new high point in Nasser’s pan-Arabist quest to unite the Arabs in one state. Later that year, riots broke out in Lebanon after President Camille Chamoun—a member of Lebanon’s powerful Maronite Christian minority and a foe of Nasser—sought to tinker with the exquisitely delicate Lebanese constitution, which painstakingly balanced power between Lebanon’s sectarian groups, and give himself a second term. Nasserite mobs burst onto Beirut’s streets. With their long-standing difficulty differentiating between authentic nationalism and encroaching Marxism, Eisenhower and Dulles, as one scholar has quipped, “saw red.”<sup>136</sup>

The riots seemed to be ebbing until July 14, when Western policy in the region suffered a jolt comparable only to the Czech arms deal and Suez: Nasser’s main regional rival, King Faysal of Iraq, was toppled in a military coup in which both Faysal and Prime Minister Nuri al-Said were brutally murdered. The coup’s leader, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, played up Faysal’s failure to help Nasser during Suez.<sup>137</sup> Meanwhile, in Lebanon, civil war erupted between Chamoun’s Christian allies and the mostly Muslim admirers of Nasser. Fearing that a series of pro-Western dominoes were about to fall in the Middle East, Eisenhower sent the Marines to prop them up. Their arrival calmed the fighting in Lebanon, which eventually returned to the old power-balancing arrangements.<sup>138</sup> In the meantime, Ike and Dulles scoured the region for hints of communist activity, rushing troops to Jordan (with British help), Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to keep friendly kings on their thrones. None of the other supposedly wobbly Arab dominoes fell, and by October, the American troops were back home.

With Nasser now looking far worse to Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion looked slightly better.<sup>139</sup> Israel had played a useful (albeit minor) role in the 1958 crisis by letting U.S. and British planes fly through its airspace en route to Jordan. But this warmed ties only slightly. When the Soviet Union demanded that Israel stop the overflights, Ben-Gurion decided not to chance

a Soviet intervention and said that the flights would stop forthwith. Dulles called Ben-Gurion's reversal "a surrender to the Soviets, a violation of a commitment to the United States, and a bad example for countries willing to stand up to Soviet expansionism."<sup>140</sup> Ben-Gurion again felt the back of Washington's hand. "I was therefore shocked to hear . . . [you] say to our Ambassador that Israel had 'caved in' immediately to a Soviet threat, and that a Soviet letter can bring us to submission," a wounded Ben-Gurion wrote Dulles. "We do not have the physical strength which certain great nations possess."<sup>141</sup> After the 1958 crises passed, U.S. economic and technical aid rose somewhat, and U.S.–Israel relations improved slightly—although after the threat of U.N. sanctions, nationally televised presidential reprimands, demands to give back Israel's territorial gains, voluble disdain for the Israel lobby, and accusations of having endangered the West's entire posture in the Middle East, one might think there was nowhere to go but up.

Eisenhower's view of Israel was not helped by the prospect that Israel might get the bomb. In late December 1960, press reports revealed that Israel was secretly building a nuclear reactor near the Negev desert town of Dimona that might be able to produce the fissile material for atomic weapons. In 1955, under the terms of his Atoms for Peace program, Ike had actually given Israel a much smaller research reactor, but Dimona—a heretofore secret fruit of the French-Israeli nexus—troubled Eisenhower's last days in the Oval Office.

Meanwhile, Nasser felt himself hemmed in. To the Egyptian leader's fury, the new junta in Iraq killed scores of Iraqi Nasserites in 1959 in Mosul.<sup>142</sup> Nasser also found his ties to Moscow cooling after he accused his local communist party of plotting his overthrow and cracked down on it. Eisenhower used the new Soviet-Egyptian strain as the pretext to restart the U.S. aid program that had been severed over Suez, but after the interventions of 1956 and 1958, a major rapprochement between Washington and Cairo seemed unlikely anytime soon. Major arms sales to Israel seemed just as implausible; when Ben-Gurion asked the administration for defensive Hawk anti-aircraft missiles in 1960, he was rebuffed. It would take John F. Kennedy to change matters.

## LEGACIES

Kennedy inherited a mess in the Middle East. The Baghdad Pact had failed, the Aswan overture to Nasser had failed, and the reliance on the British had failed. Eisenhower and Dulles had left America on chilly terms with both Israel and Egypt, and America's conservative Arab friends

were still rattled after the fall of Iraq and the 1958 Eisenhower Doctrine interventions.

In particular, Kennedy took over from what was almost certainly the least pro-Israel presidency in American history. While Eisenhower made some sympathetic noises about the embattled Jewish republic, he never shed his fear that Israel might snarl U.S. regional strategy.<sup>143</sup> Eisenhower and Dulles saw the shambles that their Middle East policy had become — Britain useless, Iraq lost, Egypt and Syria falling into the Soviet orbit, the conservative monarchs anxious and exposed, Israel unpredictable and jittery, and the world rattled by threats of nuclear war — and found in it confirmation of their worries that the Arab-Israeli conflict would seriously undercut the West's ability to keep the Soviet Union out of the Middle East. Suez confirmed Ike's direst suspicions about what Israel could mean for the Cold War.<sup>144</sup> "It wasn't passivity," said Walworth Barbour, Kennedy's genial ambassador to Israel, of Eisenhower's attitude toward the Jewish state. "It was antagonism."<sup>145</sup>

Bad as he felt about Israel, Eisenhower felt even worse about Egypt. Eisenhower and Dulles were not out to save Nasser during the Suez crisis; they were out to save containment. Nasser was still a thorn in the American paw, and America's Middle Eastern interventions — first diplomatic and then military — in 1956 and 1958 respectively were undergirded by the need to respond to the pan-Arabism emanating from Cairo. Indeed, America after Suez could sometimes sound like France before Suez. When Egypt and Syria merged to form the United Arab Republic (UAR) in February 1958, Dulles warned that Nasser "whipped up Pan-Arabism much as Hitler whipped up Pan-Germanism as a means of promoting an expansion of his power."<sup>146</sup>

Kennedy's immediate inheritance, then, was a seriously eroded posture in the Middle East. Truman bequeathed him some warmth toward the Jewish state and a lasting Arab suspicion of Democratic presidents. Eisenhower bequeathed a regional shambles, with Egypt and Israel both in Washington's bad graces. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union — while still skeptical about Nasser, who was not much of a communist — was probing for ways to expand its influence, and the Arab conservatives were looking for ways to limit Nasser's. After the second Arab-Israeli war, peace seemed farther off than ever. With casual contempt, Kennedy would conclude that Eisenhower and Dulles had made a hash of things. It was high time, Kennedy thought, that the torch was passed.