

Speeches and messages: 1969-1970: Vietnam and Israel - similarities and difference

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VIETNAM AND ISRAEL--SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

According to the Congressional ornithological classification system, I am considered a Vietnam Dove and an Israel Hawk. There are many of this plumage. I am in good company.

Recently, political commentators and editorial writers have criticized those who, like myself, support an early disengagement from Vietnam for supporting the sale of Phantom and Skyhawk jets to Israel. They have accused us of hypocrisy and of being inconsistent. They accuse us of being peacemongers in Indo-China but being warmongers in the Middle East.

I am here today to refute that charge. There is no hypocrisy. There is no inconsistency. Only the most superficial of examinations of the issues can lead to such a conclusion. The similarities between this nation's involvement in Indo-China and the situation in the Middle East are few indeed. The differences are many and profound.

I do not speak of the differences between the jungles of Southeast Asia on the one hand and fertile plains and desert of the Middle East on the other. Nor do I speak of the differences between an Eastern and what is basically a Western nation. I speak primarily of the differences in the relationship between a people and their government: the people in Vietnam and Cambodia and their government on the one hand, and the relationship which exists between the government of Israel and her people on the other. These differences are not only striking--they are important--they are profound.

In Vietnam, and now in Cambodia, we are in trouble in large part because we have come to the aid of nations which seek our help largely in a search for assistance in resolving their own domestic conflicts--in perpetuating themselves in power. We see a government without the support of its people. We see corruption, rigged elections, the political opposition jailed and other attributes of dictatorship and oppression. We see weak governments which seek control through the denial of political freedom, and who seek survival in power on the premise they are helping us halt aggressive communist imperialism.

By way of contrast, no one can accuse the State of Israel of dictatorship. No one can accuse Israel of corruption, nor of inability to manage its own internal affairs. Neither can she stand condemned for her system of government or the policies of that government. This is a most vital difference. There are others.

In Vietnam, we have been embroiled in war for nearly a decade now. It has cost us some 50,000 American lives. It is now costing more than a hundred such lives each week in addition to the many hundreds of wounded. Of our treasure it is currently costing us some \$2 billion dollars each month. Over the past five years it has cost us \$81.4 billion dollars and there is, as yet, no end in sight.

Under our Military Assistance Program, the United States gave the countries of the Indo-China region almost \$3 billion dollars in arms during the years 1950 through 1968. We are providing almost \$2 billion dollars in military aid in Fiscal 1970.

During the 1950-1968 period we also gave \$1.4 billion dollars in military assistance to Greece, almost \$2.6 billion dollars in such aid to Turkey, over \$750 million dollars in aid to Iran, \$50 million dollars in aid to Jordan, \$46 million dollars in military aid to Iraq, \$34 million dollars to Saudi Arabia, and nearly \$9 million dollars in military aid to Lebanon.

But we gave not one cent in such aid to Israel. Indeed we even placed an embargo on military equipment sales to Israel in 1947, again in 1955 and in 1967, following the June war. And more recently the President extended the ban on the sale of jets to that nation.

Unlike Indo-China, where we have well over 400,000 of our troops serving at present, as well as many para-military personnel we don't have even a single military advisor serving in Israel--and they obviously need none.

And unlike the situation in Southeast Asia, in Israel we not only provide no military aid nor American personnel, we provide no economic aid either. Nor is Israel asking for any gift. All they ask is for the right to purchase--to purchase for good hard cash--the necessary arms to counter the threat posed to their security.

When the President announced on March 23rd, after some six months of study, that he would not sell Israel Skyhawk or Phantom jets at that time, I believe he was, most sincerely, trying to put an end to the Mid-East arms race. He was trying to retain the balance which existed at that time.

But what was the Soviet response? Did they seize on this opportunity to cool their Mid-East involvement? Quite the contrary.

Their response was to escalate their support. The Soviet Union moved to increase both her arms and her troops in Egypt. In the face of this reaction, failure on our part to counter this build-up now will only encourage additional and dangerous Soviet steps. For let there be no question about it--a refusal to sell fighter planes to Israel is not to refuse to take sides. In the face of these actions by the opposition, it is to take sides against Israel.

In Southeast Asia, we seek to get out of Vietnam. In the Middle East, we seek to prevent a Vietnam from coming into being.

The big question for the United States, however is not the survival of Israel as a viable nation unless this involves our national security. If our security is not involved, we can justify an unwillingness to sell jets regardless of the emotional attachment which so many Americans have for that heroic State.

But I believe our security is involved. We cannot afford to let Israel go undefended. We cannot afford to permit the Soviet Union to use the Arab-Israeli dispute to gain control of the strategic Middle-East.

Israel is a small nation. About the size of New Jersey, it has even fewer people. When ten Israeli children are killed in a rocket attack it is as though 750 of our children were ambushed and killed here in the United States. When Israel loses 20 of her soldiers in action it is as though the United States were losing 1,500. We have grown accustomed to thinking of such figures in American terms and therefore underestimate both the tragedy and suffering which has afflicted these people. This habit may lead us to underestimate the significance of 10,000 Russian military personnel in Egypt.

Let there be no mistake about it. Israel has a strong and effective fighting force. She possesses a superior though outnumbered air force. For its size, it is probably the best in the world. Its esprit de corps is wonderful to behold. The ground crews are excellent, well trained and adaptable. For its size--some 320 fighter planes--it is likely the best in the world.

But the Arab states can also gain sophistication with increased help from the outside. In numbers, they already enjoy a tremendous superiority. This is a long term threat which Israel can ignore only at her peril.

I very much want to see a cease fire in the Middle East. I hope the President's latest call for a three months halt in hostile action will be accepted by all parties, and that this halt will permit a binding agreement leading to permanent peace. I am confident that you all share that hope.

I fear, however, that a cease fire is not going to come about as long as Egypt feels that if they just continue to build up their armed strength with Russian help they will be in a relatively better position in deliberations at some future time. And I fear the government in Cairo will operate on that premise until we clearly indicate a total unwillingness to permit an escalation of Soviet arms in Egypt without proper response in Tel Aviv. Bombastic rhetoric and an uncertain policy will be to no avail in this contest. Nor will secret sales reduce other Arab States' hostility toward the United States. It must rather be made perfectly clear that our commitment to the territorial integrity of Israel will be kept and that keeping it threatens neither the Arab States' security nor their welfare.

We may well ask, just how important is the survival of Israel to the United States. It may best be answered by asking a corollary question. How important is control of the Suez and the Eastern Mediterranean to the Soviet Union? This has long been their goal and their target in that area. Such control is the sole reason for their aid to Egypt.

With an unstable military dictatorship in Greece, with uncertainty in Turkey, and with a demonstrated reluctance on the part of the NATO countries to meet their commitments we need friends displaying constancy and strength. Israel alone has demonstrated those capacities--those attributes.

Our military withdrawal from Cambodia and Vietnam must not be made a pretext for withdrawal from our nation's responsibilities in Asia, let alone in other parts of the world. Vietnam is not Asia and it is certainly not Israel.

We have big power influence. Our withdrawal into a neo isolationism will not relieve smaller free nations from such influence. It will merely provide no counter in the case of the Middle East to Soviet dominance over these smaller nations. For them it will mean a loss of freedom.

America's mistake which is Vietnam is not an indictment of America's purpose, but of our judgment. We went to war to bolster a government which neither had nor merited the support of its own people. We did so to help prevent the success of a so-called "war of liberation." We have discovered after great cost that to enter a conflict under such conditions is to make meaningful victory impossible. As some have said, Vietnam is the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. But the lessons of Vietnam are no reason to shrink from our clear interest in Israel's survival as a free and independent nation.

The Israeli government is a bona fide one with strong and popular support. The cause in which she is engaged--her survival as a model free and independent state--has the full support of her own people and is deserving of ours. At a time when we must endure criticism for our support of military dictatorships in Greece, and in Latin America, as well as in Southeast Asia, it is refreshing to stand up and say, "I support Israel".

You have long been engaged in her support through your participation in the Jewish National Fund. You have made the deserts bloom. Where there was only sand you now have forests. For more than sixty years you have been involved in building a land and a nation. What started as an effort to reclaim and recreate the soil of Israel--to build farms and forests where there was only desert--has now become increasingly important to the defense of that nation. I understand there are now more than two hundred strategic border settlements on land owned and developed by JNF.

But you know the story of your own work far better than I. I come rather tonight to share with you my commitment to help wage the fight which is essential to the survival of Israel today. I am proud to share the honor.