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GOVT 494 – Independent Study
2 July 2014

The Eventual Triumph of Freedom:
The Power of Rhetoric in Creating and Shaping America's Special Relationship with Israel, 1998 – 2006

President George W. Bush's relationship with Ariel Sharon is most effectively understood through a sequence of both the strategic and coincidental uses of rhetoric, led to a deepening of official and unofficial ties between the United States and Israel. Though the United States and Israel were drawn together during President Bush's first administration, these rhetorical turning points also contributed to both nation-states' continued alienation from other key actors in the Middle East.

A Brief History: Pre-1948

Although it is often thought trite, and even frowned upon, among political scientists to dismiss conflicts between two groups as ancient, innate hatreds manifesting themselves in violence, any discussion of conflict between Israel and its closest neighbor would be incomplete without, at the very least, an acknowledgement of the existence of a longstanding enmity between the people of Israel and the rest of the Middle East. One might argue, as scholar Kirsten Schulze does, that the modern Arab-Israel conflict arose as Middle Eastern nationalism, both Arab and Israeli, surfaced and began to compete (Schulze 3).

At the end of World War II, colonialism was falling out of favor and self-determination was on the rise. The Great Powers, concerned mainly with the repercussions of the end of the war on the home front, began to release some of their colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The British mandate of Palestine had been established in 1920 (after World War I) and included the ancient and contested city of Jerusalem, as well as the modern-day Gaza Strip and

West Bank. However, as with many of the colonial lands, the people residing in the area had grown frustrated with the British influence and wished to create new, self-governing and independent nation-states. The Arab population wished to create a "Palestine" based on their perceived historical ties to the land, dating as far as 2,000 years prior to the Abrahamic covenant; this area included Jerusalem, one of the most sacred cities in Islam, the West Bank of the Jordan River and Dead Sea, and the Gaza Strip, which borders the Mediterranean Sea. However, the Arabs were faced with significant opposition: the Jews, too, wanted to create a state from the same land, based on *their* perceived historical ties to the land, also dating as far as 2,000 years prior to the Abrahamic covenant. In addition, the Jews prioritized statehood more than ever before, as they felt (with significant justification) that they were not protected as an ethnic minority group in Europe and had been largely unable to escape the tragedy of the Holocaust. So, this conflict over historic land rights, which had been an issue for hundreds of years in the region, took a position at the forefront when it seemed as though colonialism would end and people would be allowed to form their own states. How would the conflict over land be resolved when a colonial power no longer maintained hegemony in the region? How, and through what means, would a group of people establish their control over a formerly colonial area?

The British mandate of Palestine was crumbling and conflict was present throughout the region, as the Arabs and the Jews anticipated an imminent struggle over the land when the British officially left the region. Scholar Ahron Bregman is careful to note that the conflict was "…not yet a full-blown civil war but rather skirmishes and a vicious circle where an action was followed by a reprisal with disturbances and clashes between Jews and Arabs spreading to all parts of Palestine" (Bregman 9). Though it was merely a civil war, it was especially brutal: "The civil war in Palestine was vicious, cruel and littered with atrocities. It involved immense human

suffering and a degree of blatant brutality never before seen in Jewish-Arab relations in

Palestine, which had usually seen the two peoples living side-by-side in relative peace"

(Bregman 13). This somewhat sudden descent into chaos in the region was a result of uncertainty

over the future, as well as a belief that each side – and it alone – would eventually possess the

land. Early attempts to begin to establish hegemony in the region led to incredibly high and

devastating levels of violence, even before inter-state war had officially been declared.

David Ben-Gurion and the Knesset officially declared the state of Israel on May 15,

1948. President Harry Truman controversially granted official diplomatic recognition on behalf

of the United States eleven minutes later, against the advice of his Secretary of State George

Marshall. In fact, Marshall told Truman that, should Truman choose to recognize Israel, Marshall

would never support Truman politically again. Truman, as the President, considered the opinions

of his advisors before making a controversial decision – and he committed to his decision

without wavering. Since then, the United States has been Israel's most steadfast and reliable ally.

Truman's tenacity would be mirrored more than 50 years later, when President George

W. Bush was faced with similarly difficult decisions on foreign policy and the American

relationship with Israel. Like Truman, Bush considered the input of his advisors while still

making the ultimate decisions as the President – choices that were often contrary to the advice he

had received. Like Truman, Bush's steadfastness and commitment to his decisions led to

unprecedented and strong diplomatic and personal relationships with Israel and its leadership.

<center>The United States and Israel until 1998</center>

With the exceptions of Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush, both of

whom experienced rocky relationships with Israel, all other American Presidents favored Israel,

with varying degrees of military and economic support (Matthews 2). Jimmy Carter brokered the

Camp David Peace Accords in 1978 between Egypt, represented by Anwar Sadat, and Israel, represented by Menachim Begin. In 1993, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the Oslo Accords. History – and popular opinion – remains divided on the success of these peace summits. Most notably, a right-wing Jewish citizen of Israel assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 for his role in the Oslo Accords. However, peace treaties – those that have involved the United States, and those that have excluded the United States – have been, at least thus far, unable to stop the pervasive violence in the region. While the treaties in the Middle East have led to periods of relative inactivity, violence inevitably tends to restart, often in different, more harmful ways.

<div align="center">1998: – A Friendship Established and A Relationship Foreshadowed</div>

George W. Bush, the son of President George H.W. Bush, became the governor of Texas in 1994 and had expressed interest in visiting Israel immediately after the gubernatorial election (Matthews 1). However, it would take another four years for him to visit the country. As a part of an American delegation of governors that included then-Governor of Utah, Mike Leavitt, then-Governor of Massachusetts, Paul Cellucci, and then-Governor of Montana, Marc Racicot, Bush visited Israel after he was reelected as Governor of Texas in 1998. Many political pundits viewed this trip to Israel as one of the first steps then-Governor Bush was taking to introduce the idea of his candidacy for President in the election of 2000 – and while this might have been the case, it is also true that Bush had wanted to visit Israel for many years prior to considering a run for the Presidency (Matthews 12).

Over the course of just three days, the governors toured the country and learned about the history of the region and the modern challenges facing its residents. A highlight of his trip was a meeting with then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ariel Sharon and subsequent helicopter tour of the

country, in which Sharon highlighted new settlements that he had established as Minister of

Housing and military engagements in which he had participated. In his 2010 memoir *Decision*

*Points,* President Bush reflected on the trip: "I was struck by Israel's vulnerability in a hostile

neighborhood. Ever since President Harry Truman defied his secretary of state by recognizing

Israel in 1948, America had been the Jewish state's best friend. I came away convinced that we

had a responsibility to keep that relationship strong" (Bush 400). Then-Governor Bush left Israel

with a new understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the unique difficulties faced by

Israel – but not before making a prediction: "...[Bush] told [Doug Wead] that he said to Sharon,

'Someday you'll be the prime minister of Israel, and I'll be president of the United States, and

we'll solve this thing'" (Matthews 23). This statement, though perhaps meant to be less-than-

serious at the time, reflected the hopes and aspirations of a future President and foreshadowed an

influential relationship that would impact relations with both Israel and other actors in the

Middle East.

<u>1999 – 2000: A Campaign, A Victory and A New Vision for the Future</u>

George W. Bush declared his candidacy for the Presidency in June 1999, and during his

campaign, he made his support for Israel known:

> ...Republican candidate George W. Bush voiced his admiration for
> Ariel Sharon. At an American-Israel Public Affairs Committee
> (AIPAC) conference in May 2000, Bush promised the crowd that,
> unlike the Democrats, he would not interfere in the Israeli
> elections. He criticized Clinton and the Democratic presidential
> candidate, Vice President Al Gore, for favoring Barak over
> Netanyahu in 1999, and declared that 'my support for Israel is not
> conditional on the outcome of the peace process,' at stance directly
> at odds with his father's in 1991 – 1992 (Smith 501).

Bush sought not only to distinguish himself from the candidate of the other party, but also

to highlight the differences between his father's approach to Israel and his own. This strategy

was undoubtedly not only a political move – he understood how polarizing and alienating his father's remarks had been to the American and global Jewish community – but also a strategy borne out of a true personal concern for Israel and respect for the country's commitment to democracy.

Meanwhile, during the campaign, President Bill Clinton was attempting to contribute to the Middle Eastern peace process by meeting with the leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Barak offered concessions unlike any that had ever been seen in the history of the peace process. However, Arafat rejected the concessions, leading to Clinton's frustrations and personal belief that Arafat was responsible for the failure of the summit. Nine weeks later, the second Intifada began, leading to increased tensions and violence in the Middle East (Matthews xv). Regardless of the outcome of the election – polls conducted that summer showed that the election could go in favor of either candidate – whoever won would inherit a difficult situation in the Middle East.

In undoubtedly the most controversial campaign and election in modern American history, Bush prevailed over Al Gore. Though the election itself was November 7, 2000, the American people would not know its outcome until December 12, 2000, when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of George Bush in the now-infamous 5-4 *Bush v. Gore* ruling. George Walker Bush was inaugurated as the 43$^{rd}$ President of the United States on January 20, 2001.

<u>2001: A Mandate from the Israeli People and An American Tragedy Unlike Any Ever Seen</u>

The failure of the summer 2000 peace accords left Clinton with a personal bitterness towards Arafat – something he shared with the newly elected President. However, Bush claimed that he would reserve judgment and allow the leaders from both delegations – both Israel and Palestine – to establish their own reputations with his Administration (Matthews 78 - 79).

However, according to scholar Charles B. Smith, President Bush's sentiments towards Israel were evident early in his first term as President: "Sympathetic to Sharon...Bush declined to become involved in the intricacies of the conflict. He assured Sharon that the United States would not intervene in Israeli-Palestinian affairs and praised [Sharon's] 'marvelous sense of history'" (Smith 514). It is also notable that, "during the next two years, Bush would meet with Sharon at the White House eight times while never inviting Arafat, whom he, like Sharon, held responsible for the violence" (Smith 514).

Ultimately, the first Bush administration represented unprecedented, "committed ideological support for...right-wing Israeli leaders" (Smith 519). This support manifested itself not only among political leaders, but among influential civil society leaders as well. Bush met with Abraham Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, in early March 2001. On March 13, Foxman sent the President a letter:

> It was a great honor and pleasure to meet with you last week at the White House. Thank you so very much for taking the time to brief us on matters of concern to us, as Americans, and as representatives of the American Jewish community. It was clear to all who listened that your commitment to the safety and security of the State of Israel remains strong and that you are dedicated to working with us to preserve the constitutional safeguards that have come to define this great nation. I thank you for your support and once again pledge to help you – in whatever way I can – to further these ideals ("Letter to President Bush").

Bush, and others in his administration, realized the importance of a combined top-down and bottom-up approach to diplomacy. By meeting with Foxman and other leaders in the American Jewish community, Bush was trying to engender support for his administration (after all, only 19% of American Jews had voted for him in 2000) and publicly reinforce his commitment to the American-Israeli diplomatic relationship ("U.S. Presidential Elections: Jewish Voting Record.").

In 2001 in Israel, Ariel Sharon set his sights on the role of Prime Minister. Sharon was, and continues to be, one of the most decorated military leaders in modern Israel's history. Sharon's various roles in different governments in the latter half of the 20th century made his candidacy for the Prime Minister the logical next step in Sharon's public life.

> Stubbornly hawkish, possessed of a dark and narrow view of the Arab world, and less than a model of probity in his political and business affairs, Sharon nonetheless brought valuable strengths. He commanded the Israeli political scene as had only a handful of Israeli leaders before him, displaying a mastery of tactics, timing, and coalition management. Although his popularity rose and fell with the national mood, Sharon's commitment to Israel's security was widely trusted by his countrymen. He was a pragmatist, not an ideologue. And when he made a solemn commitment, particularly one that was important to the United States, he usually kept it (Matthews xvii).

Sharon viewed the office very seriously: "...Sharon nevertheless saw the Prime Minister as responsible for the Jewish people as a whole, saying at one point: 'We shall be strong, determined, and steadfast in defending ourselves and will cut off any hand raised against Jews anywhere'" (Matthews 58). In addition, Uri Dan, in his forward to Sharon's autobiography *Warrior,* stated, "... to serve as prime minister of the Jewish state is to assume responsibility for the entire Jewish people, who have achieved their 2,000-year-old dream of reestablishing their homeland" (Sharon 1). In fact, he was hailed as "Arik, King of the Jews" (Jampole). The rhetorical significance of this biblical comparison should not be understated – his military prowess, commitment to security, and political accomplishments caused his supporters to view him as a modern-day messiah figure, especially in the context of an increasingly hostile region.

Given the failure of the 2000 Camp David summit and the Israeli people's growing distrust of Ehud Barak, Sharon won the election handily. He enjoyed a mandate never before seen in the history of Israel: he garnered more than 60% of the vote, a feat especially noteworthy

in a parliamentary democracy (Sharon 7). Of course, the irony was that Sharon's victory

produced a solid mandate to rule, while President Bush's victory was hard-fought (and was

considered by many Americans to be illegitimate).

When the election was over, Bush committed very early to a strong diplomatic

relationship with the new Israeli Prime Minister. He immediately invited Sharon to Washington,

D.C. Due to his difficult past relationship with George W. Bush's father, George H.W. Bush,

Sharon looked forward to the opportunity to re-establish himself in Washington among the new

generation of political elites.

> Sharon, meanwhile, was preparing for his first visit to Washington.
> The president invited him to come on March 20, barely a fortnight
> after he took office. That looked like a friendly sign, but it also
> seemed to indicate that the administration wanted early
> confirmation of its own assurances to other governments of
> Sharon's newfound moderation and perspicacity. The visit laid the
> foundation for a remarkable – because so unexpected and
> seemingly incongruous – empathy between George W. Bush and
> Ariel Sharon (though it is unsurprising that Bush 43 shrugged off
> warnings and pejorative depictions of Sharon from members of the
> Bush 41 administration). For all new Israeli prime ministers, their
> first visit to Washington is almost an extension of their election
> victory celebration. For Sharon – and especially given the name
> and provenance of his host – it was the very acme of his long-
> yearned-for rehabilitation (Landau 368).

Despite their quite different ascents to power, "as chief executives, the American and the

Israeli shared important characteristics. Each displayed an unwavering faith in his own instincts.

Each viewed the world in stark terms of black and white, friend and foe, good and evil"

(Matthews 41). From the very beginning of his stint as the Prime Minister, "[Sharon] was

determined to build the closest possible relations with the United States" (Landau 364).

When Sharon arrived in Washington, "the president recalled his heli-tour of Israel as

Sharon's guest back in December 1998. Neither of them had thought then they would meet next

time as heads of their respective countries, Bush joked" (Landau 364). David Landau's

observation of Bush's comment is quite different than Mark Matthews', who recalled that Bush

had resolved to end the violence in the Middle East once and for all in 1998 (Matthews 23).

These differing commentaries contribute to differing expectations for the role of the American

President in brokering a lasting peace. Bush made a bold prediction in 1998, when the

Presidency, Sharon's Prime Ministership, and their diplomatic partnership seemed like a distant

dream. Now, however, Bush backpedaled, claiming that no one could have foreseen the fateful

combination of actors and circumstances. Perhaps Bush was daunted by the new reality of their

abilities and the opportunity to influence the peace process, which influenced his rhetorical

choice, or perhaps he sought to break the ice and remind Sharon of the humble beginnings of

their relationship. However, it is undeniable that the first official meeting between the two new

Heads of State built upon the foundation laid during Bush's trip to Israel as Governor of Texas.

After Sharon left Washington, Bush continued his display of pro-Israel sentiment. In May

2001, in an address to AIPAC, Bush stated,

> We will speak up for our principles and we will stand up for our
> friends in the world. And one of our most important friends is the
> State of Israel. ... Israel is a small country that has lived under
> threat throughout its existence. At the first meeting of my National
> Security Council, I told them a top foreign policy priority is the
> safety and security of Israel. My Administration will be steadfast
> in supporting Israel against terrorism and violence, and in seeking
> the peace for which all Israelis pray.

This demonstration of pro-Israel rhetoric at AIPAC was an influential part of his

consistent effort to build support among civil society – by meeting with small groups of Jewish

leaders, as well as addressing larger groups, Bush attempted to establish his reputation as a friend

of Israel to build trust and goodwill among the Jewish populations of both the United States and

Israel.

The world changed on September 11, 2001: a day unlike any other in American history. Every official American action in the immediate wake of the attacks of the World Trade Center was strategic and significant. Thus, President Bush's decision to contact Sharon was particularly meaningful. Bush recounts in *Decision Points* that he spoke to Sharon, "a leader who understood what it meant to deal with terror," immediately before the first Cabinet meeting held since the attacks (Bush 145). David Landau frames the conversation differently:

> Like every head of government, Sharon put in a condolence call to the president on watching the fall of the Twin Towers. He was called back about twenty-four hours later. He offered his sympathies and solidarity. Bush thanked him and said that now more than ever the United States understood what Israel is up against in its fight against terror. 'Then,' Kurtzer recalled, 'Bush says, listen, you can do me a favor. I know you've authorized Shimon Peres to go meet Arafat. Well, this would be a good time to do it. Sharon says no, I'm not ready to do this now. He gets off the phone, and now you have a split screen: In the Oval Office, they're pissed, because Sharon is the first person in the world to say no to the president after 9/11, on something that they don't think is very cosmic. Sharon is pissed because the truck seems to be coming down the highway at him faster than ever' (Landau 381).

This historiographical differentiation is quite significant: in *Decision Points,* Bush wished to convey that, in a time of crisis, he valued the advice of a world leader who was experienced in dealing with terrorism and attacks on sovereignty. However, according to Landau, Bush used a catastrophe and a period of despair and uncertainty in an attempt to further his own political agenda.

In the period immediately after September 11, Bush rejoined the dialogue on the Middle Eastern peace process, adding a new twist unlike any other in American history: he voiced his official support for the establishment of Palestine. According to Russ Landau, Bush's support for statehood was under great diplomatic pressure from Saudi Arabia. Sharon understood, and

mirrored Bush's rhetoric, highlighting Israel's defining role in the possible Palestinian statehood

process:

> In the weeks between 9/11 and the Munich speech [on October 2],
> both Bush and Sharon made public statements voicing their
> support for the eventual creation of an independent Palestinian
> state. Sharon, aware that this was the thrust of Bush's letter to
> Crown Prince Abdullah, made his statement on September 23 to a
> gathering of teachers at Latrun, the site of his 1948 brush with
> death in the bloody, failed battle against the Jordanians. 'Israel
> wants to give the Palestinians what no one else gave them – a state.
> Not the Turks, the British, the Egyptians, or the Jordanians gave
> them this possibility' (Landau 382).

However, "No one in Jerusalem or in Washington took Sharon's declaration too seriously

because it was assumed that the borders he was contemplating would be rejected by the

Palestinians as inadequate and the security conditions he proposed to demand of them would be

unacceptable" (Landau 382).

In early October,

> Bush's 'vision' of an independent Palestine living at peace
> alongside Israel was articulated at a press conference in the Oval
> Office on October 2. 'The idea of a Palestinian state has always
> been a part of a vision, so long as the right of Israel to exist is
> respected,' the president said. That was doubtless true, at least
> since the United States began a dialogue with the PLO in the late
> 1980s. But it had never been spelled out before so explicitly. The
> administration was at pains to stress that the new policy
> pronouncement had been in the works before 9/11" (Landau 382).

This renewed call for Palestinian statehood was not well-received by Sharon or the Israeli

government, who condemned Bush's policy using rhetoric that harkened back to the interwar

period:

> Then, on October 5, Sharon lashed out at Bush with a pathos and
> ferocity that left the world aghast. 'I appeal to the Western
> democracies,' Sharon proclaimed in prepared remarks to
> journalists in Tel Aviv, 'and first and foremost the leader of the
> free world, the United States: Do not repeat the terrible mistake of

> 1938. Then, the enlightened democracies of Europe decided to sacrifice Czechoslovakia in return for a temporary, comfortable solution. Do not try to appease the Arabs at our expense. We will not be able to accept that. Israel is not Czechoslovakia. Israel will fight against terror...we can rely only on ourselves. And from today onward, we will rely only on ourselves'" (Landau 383).

The rhetorical saliency of appeasement – and by extension, the Holocaust – cannot be understated in relation to Jewish audiences worldwide. The Bush administration understood, and was angered by, Sharon's implicit suggestions. In what seemed to be a game of call-and-response: "Washington...demanded an immediate retraction [of Sharon's statement]. Within a day, Sharon's office sensibly issued a statement explaining that his words had been misinterpreted" (Landau 383). After this heated exchange, full of negative implications for both the United States and Israel, it was unclear if the thus-far strong relationship between Sharon and Bush would survive despite its bruises.

<div align="center">2002: The Relationship Continues, and a Plan for Peace</div>

Despite the rough patch following September 11, Bush and Sharon's "relationship soon pulled out of this trough and developed into a closeness rarely achieved between leaders of the two countries. 'That the president liked Ariel Sharon wasn't the point," Aaron Miller explained. 'When it came to fighting terror, seeking peace, and promoting democracy, Israel was on the right side of the line. Arafat and the others had chosen the wrong side'" (Landau 383).

In April 2002, President Bush made a controversial statement:

> While at the White House on April 18...Bush took a notably pro-Israel stance... 'I do believe Ariel Sharon is a man of peace.' This comment infuriated the Palestinian leadership, but they were not alone in reacting negatively: According to White House scuttlebutt, the president's father, George H.W. Bush, who seldom called him on policy matters, telephoned to complain vociferously about the president's choice of words. Nor was the former president alone: Rice 'fully agreed at the time that the President had made a mistake' and 'done long term damage to our relations

in the Arab world,' and Powell felt that even more strongly
(Abrams 35).

In perhaps the most obvious parallel between Bush and Truman, Bush assumed a

controversial stance towards Israel, opposed by policy advisors (Colin Powell and Condoleezza

Rice) and family members (his father, the former President) alike. Though Bush considered these

opinions, he made the decision to stand by his remarks: "[y]et Bush himself was not sorry: 'The

President's view – and it worked in some cases and didn't work in some cases – was very much,

I'm going to show public faith in leaders so I can call them to account in private. He told me that

after he said that about Sharon, he told him, 'You better live up to that. You know I'm going out

on a limb for you; you better live up to that' (Abrams 35). Despite his commitment to his

statement, Bush also wished to convey the sentiment that security and peace were not mutually

exclusive: ""You can be a man of security *and* a man of peace, [Bush] urged Sharon," while

simultaneously maintaining public support for Israel and calling for Palestinian reforms (Abrams

70). In fact, "By June 2002, President Bush had made Arafat's replacement as head of the

Palestinian Authority a condition for American support of negotiations" (Smith 514). In the Rose

Garden, "[Bush] declared that he would not intervene in Palestinian-Israeli affairs until Arafat

had been replaced as head of the Palestinian Authority" (Smith 522). Unfortunately for the

United States, these public declarations urging the replacement of Arafat and Palestinian reform

had exactly the opposite of the intended effect:

> Before the announcement, Arafat's power and prestige had hit rock
> bottom and Palestinian intellectuals demanded reform and
> democratization of the regime, but Bush's declaration silenced the
> internal Palestinian democratic opposition. At a time when the US
> was waging war in Afghanistan and engaging in warmongering
> against Iraq, a demand for democratization became synonymous
> with a demand for obedience to Washington and its definition of
> democracy, a demand naturally rejected unanimously by

> Palestinians whatever their evaluation of Arafat's regime
> (Kimmerling 205).

At the same time, however, Bush's statement "was a landmark in U.S. policy in that, for the first time, an American president openly declared that the outcome of envisioned changes would be a Palestinian state, conditional on new leadership. He referred to the envisioned state as 'democratic, viable, and credible'; such a 'stable, peaceful state is necessary to achieve the security that Israel longs for'" (Smith 522).

The administration attempted to craft policy based on Bush's statement from the Rose Garden, and devised a plan known within diplomatic circles as "The Road Map":

> The Road Map stemmed from Bush's 2002 Rose Garden call for
> Arafat's removal from office and the beginning of Palestinian
> political reform. It was composed by the 'Quartet' – the United
> States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations –
> during summer 2002...[it] set out three development phases...1.
> Ending Terror and Violence, Normalizing Palestinian Life and
> Building Palestinian Institutions, 2. Transition, 3. Permanent Status
> Agreement and End of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Smith 523).

Unfortunately, the Road Map was overshadowed by the continuation of the Second Intifada. While the plan itself reached a stalemate in phase I and was later abandoned, it created conditions for Israel's later disengagement from Gaza in 2004.

In the fall of 2002, Israel's problems extended beyond security: it appeared that the Israeli economy was on the brink of collapse, and Bush was quick to reassure the world of his – and by extension, America's – full confidence in the soundness of Israel's financial institutions and the resiliency of its people. Bush spoke from a position of a leader who understood, firsthand, the negative impact that terror can have on a country's economy. David Landau asserts,

> President Bush could hardly have been more outspoken in support
> of the still dangerously teetering Israeli economy. 'I understand

what terror has done to the economy,' [Bush] told reporters. 'Terror has affected our economy; terror has affected the Israeli economy. But we've got great confidence in the Israeli economy. We've got great confidence in the Israeli people. The greatest asset Israel has is the brainpower and ingenuity of her people. And I'm convinced that the economy will be strong' (Landau 422 – 423).

President Bush's statement was a demonstration of good faith and reflected his willingness to personally vouch for Israel and belief in Israel's soundness as well as its potential.

## 2003: Refocus on the Middle East – The War on Terror

In 2003, President Bush spoke openly to NBC journalist Tom Brokaw about his hopes for a Middle East peace: 'My view is, is that the only way for there to be peace and for the survival of Israel and for the hope of the Palestinian people is for two states living side by side in peace'" (Matthews xxi). However, Bush's attention was soon diverted away from Israel and Palestine and redirected towards, in his view, a more immediate threat: dictator Saddam Hussein and an unstable, undemocratic Iraq. Led by his view that Hussein had obtained weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and posed an immediate threat to the Iraqi people, the rest of the Middle East, and the democratic world at large, Bush, backed by Congress, ordered American troops to invade Iraq in March 2003. Hussein was quickly toppled, but regime change and democratization were far more difficult to obtain. Despite American assurances, "Israelis were highly skeptical of Bush's notion that regime change in Iraq would spur democratic change in the region" (Matthews 64).

However, despite the refocus onto Iraq, especially early on in 2003, Bush still maintained support for regime change in Palestine and met with Jewish leaders for public reinforcement. In talking points for a meeting with Rabbis and Jewish Community Leaders on December 23, 2003, Bush noted that, "A Palestinian state will never be created by terror – it will be built through

reform. ... True reform will require entirely new political and economic institutions, based on democracy, market economics, and action against terrorism" ("Talking Points for Meeting with Rabbis and Jewish Community Leaders"). This meeting was, again a part of Bush's effort at political reinforcement via civil society.

<u>2004: Another Campaign and a Withdrawal</u>

In 2004, Sharon decided to take an unprecedented step: Israel would unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip, rendering Palestinians control of the strategically and politically significant area. Sharon hoped would help bring about a more permanent, stable peace in the region. It was also an attempt to make an important statement to the international community: Israel was committed to creating conditions for a viable, independent Palestinian state, without requiring qualifications and terms from the Palestinian leadership or people. Unfortunately, the withdrawal, intended to be a gesture of good will and good faith, elicited criticism: "Rather than offering hope, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza ended up creating an impoverished, unsupervised prison in which inmates preyed on one another. Mutual hostility between Israelis and Palestinians continued without respite, and violence became the two parties' main form of discourse" (Matthews xviii).

When it comes to its role in the creation of an independent Palestine, it seems that Israel faces a perpetual challenge: the Palestinians, and the international community, called for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza for many years. As it relates to statehood, viable governments must have both autonomy – recognition from other nation-states and extra-governmental organizations and ability to defend themselves against internal and external conflicts – as well as capacity: the ability to provide goods and services to its people. These foundations are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for statehood. The "impoverished, unsupervised prison" into which Gaza

transformed after Israel's withdrawal can no longer be blamed on Israel. With the benefits of statehood also comes an obligation by the governing body to accept responsibility for a state's success or failure – something the Palestinians, and scholars like Mark Matthews – are unable to do. Gaza has been independent for more than ten years – its challenges can no longer be attributed solely to Israel.

November 2004 was an especially important month in both the United States and Israel. In the United States, President Bush and Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts faced off for the Presidency. Bush won the election: unlike in 2000, he enjoyed a comfortable popular margin. Despite Bush's careful and sustained cultivation of *diplomatic* support from Israel, support from American Jews rose only 5% from the 2000 campaign, with only 24% of Jewish voters supporting Bush over Kerry ("U.S. Presidential Elections: Jewish Voting Record."). Despite a lack of popular support, Bush's commitment to Israel would not waver. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, Yasser Arafat, the pioneer of Palestinian leadership and influential regional and global actor for the latter half of the 20th century, died at age 75 under mysterious circumstances. His death marked the exit of a key player from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He had died without brokering a viable peace. While Palestinians and much of the rest of the world mourned his death –he was, undoubtedly, an important symbolic leader in the Middle East – his death also represented a renewed opportunity to find peace with a new Palestinian leader: a leader who was, perhaps, more willing to compromise and make concessions in an effort to establish a lasting peace.

## 2005: Another Election and Problems Arise

In 2005, Sharon dissolved the Knesset and called for new elections. He ran on a platform of a coalition government, formed with the support of Benjamin Netanyahu as Minister of

Finance and other members of the Likud (Conservative) Party. Sharon highlighted his relationship with President Bush during his campaign, because according to David Landau, "All the voters understood the extent to which war, peace, and prosperity hinged for Israel on the strength of its alliance with America...'Six times I've made my way from Jerusalem to Washington to meet with the president,' Sharon recalled proudly in a speech in July" (Landau 418).

Sharon ultimately prevailed in the election, although with less of a mandate than the 2001 elections. The election results may be attributed to a variety of factors, including the Israeli economy's borderline collapse in 2002, or perhaps uncertainty over the withdrawal from Gaza – the full ramifications of the unilateral actions had yet to be realized in 2005. However, Sharon continued to govern with the support of his coalition and the people.

Sharon had his first stroke in December 2005. Though it was minor, President Bush's concern prompted him to contact Sharon: "After Sharon left the hospital, Bush called him at his home. 'Watch what you eat, start physical training, and work fewer hours,' the president said. 'I worry about you, my friend'" (Landau 533). Sharon was well known in Israel for his defiance of doctors' orders and resistance to diet and exercise regimes. Bush, on the other hand, is a dedicated runner, committed to physical fitness and abstinence from alcohol. Unfortunately, Bush's advice did not have much of an impact: the stroke in December was just an ominous foreshadowing of what was to come in January 2006.

<div align="center">2006: Tragedy</div>

Tragedy struck early in 2006: on January 4, Ariel Sharon had another stroke, leaving him completely incapacitated and unable to continue in his role as Prime Minister. Immediately following the news of Sharon's stroke, the President released a statement, notable for its

continuation of the 'man of peace' rhetoric: "'Laura and I share the concerns of the Israeli people about Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's health, and we are praying for his recovery. Prime Minister Sharon is a man of courage and peace. On behalf of all Americans, we send our best wishes and hopes to the prime minister and his family'" (Matthews 409). A few days later, at an address given to university presidents on the necessity of language training in the rapidly developing areas of the Middle East and South Asia, President Bush paused to acknowledge Sharon: "'But first, our nation sends our deepest sympathies to Ariel Sharon. He lies immobilized in an Israeli hospital. We pray for his recovery. He's a good man, a strong man, a man who cared deeply about the security of the Israeli people and a man who had a vision for peace. May God bless him.'" Of course, the irony of this statement was that, inadvertently, "... Midway through the tribute...Bush had veered from the present to the past tense" (Matthews 410). This unintentional, yet symbolic, shift in rhetoric reflected the end of an era in American-Israeli diplomacy: since then, the relationship between the American President and Israeli Prime Minister has never enjoyed the same closeness or significance as the relationship of President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon.

In his 2010 memoir *Decision Points,* President Bush reflected on Sharon's stroke and the subsequent events: "'I've always wondered what might have been possible if Ariel had continued to serve. He had established his credibility on security, he had the trust of the Israeli people, and I believe he could have been a part of a historic peace" (Bush 407). Bush's use of Sharon's first name in this reflection indicates the closeness of their relationship. Unfortunately it is impossible to discern the outcome of the Bush/Sharon relationship had Sharon stayed healthy, but it is undeniable that Bush had high hopes for the future of Israel with Sharon at the helm, as well as the American-Israeli relationship.

Beyond 2006: Regime Change

New elections were held in March 2006, and Ehud Olmert, of the newly formed Kadima

("Forward") Party, formed a coalition with the Labour Party and assumed the role of Prime

Minister. Sharon himself had left the conservative Likud ("Consolidation") Party and formed

Kadima in 2005 because he was unhappy with Likud's direction and wished to form a party that

more accurately reflected his goals of peace via unilateral disengagement. However, Olmert was

even more in favor of reaching a two-state solution by any means necessary than Sharon. An

attempt at peace again occurred in 2008, with Olmert offering historic concessions, including the

entire city of Jerusalem, to the Palestinians, represented by Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas, like Arafat

eight years previously, rejected these concessions. This rejection seemed to represent a

manifestation of Sharon's personal "belief that Israel couldn't compromise enough to satisfy the

Palestinians..." (Matthews 51). Frustration with Olmert's regime and fright over what *would*

have happened had the Palestinians accepted the Israeli concessions – after all, "...Security for

diaspora Jews was a fragile thing. To them, it depended heavily on preserving Israel's

strength..." (Matthews 58) – created conditions for conservative Benjamin Netanyahu's victory

in the next general election. Simultaneously, huge changes were occurring in the United States.

Senator John McCain of Arizona and Senator Barack Obama of Illinois were battling for the

Presidency. The recession of late 2007 and federal government bailout had, rightly or wrongly,

turned popular opinion against President Bush and in retrospect, it is clear that an Obama victory

was inevitable. John McCain had maintained pro-Israel rhetoric and Obama, while still being

pro-Israel (including visiting Israel in July 2008), was notably less supportive. After Obama's

election in November 2008 and his reelection in 2012, Netanyahu and Obama have continued to

have a difficult relationship. As recently as June 2013, Hamas kidnapped three Israeli teenagers

in the West Bank. When the bodies of the boys were found a month later, Obama was quick to urge Netanyahu to exercise restraint in his response. He publicly praised Abbas, saying, "'In President Abbas, Israel has a counterpart committed to a two-state solution and security cooperation with Israel.'... He offered no parallel praise for Netanyahu" (Associated Press).

Sharon died on January 11, 2014, almost exactly eight years after his second stroke, at age 85. His death was met with mixed reactions worldwide. The reaction from the United States, and specifically former President George W. Bush, however, was very clear. Bush released a statement through the George W. Bush Institute, in which he called Sharon "a man of courage...a warrior for the ages...a partner...a friend" ("Statement by George W. Bush"). Vice President Joe Biden led the American delegation at Sharon's funeral, though President Bush did not attend.

<u>President Bush: Friend of Israel</u>

The Bush administration was committed to perpetuating George W. Bush's reputation as a pro-Israel President. In a brochure titled "President George W. Bush: A Friend to the American Jewish Community," an official publication of the Administration, highlights President Bush's goals and his steadfast support for Israel:

> The Bush Administration is committed to defending religious freedom, confronting bigotry, attacking terrorism, and promoting moral values. President Bush has not just spoken about these goals – he has acted on them. From his earliest days in office, President Bush has condemned anti-Semitism, demonstrated steadfast support for Israel, and promoted compassionate programs at home. President Bush has always recognized that free societies must respect the rights of all their citizens – especially those of different faiths.

In addition, the brochure frames Bush's pro-Israel sentiments in the context of an increasingly dangerous global environment after September 11: "The events of September 11, 2001 reminded all Americans that the enemies of religious tolerance are also enemies of all

freedom-loving people. President Bush is leading America's war against this threat. Jews

understand, from painful history, that those willing to live with terror and intimidation later

regret their compromise. And in the war on terror, President Bush is resolved not to

compromise."

> The brochure concludes by stating:

> > Today, Jews in America know they have a steadfast friend and
> > defender in the Oval Office. But for the terrorists and their
> > supporters, it is a different story. There are fewer places to hide.
> > There are fewer allies willing to contribute to their cause. And they
> > face a resolute foe in President George W. Bush. And there is no
> > doubt: Freedom and religious liberty will prevail over the forces of
> > darkness, and the Jews of America will continue to live freely in
> > this great land."

Ultimately, Bush's legacy is that he is viewed "...as the most pro-Israel American

president. Not only did he grant Israel broad latitude in combatting Palestinian militants, but he

was seen to be moving U.S. policy toward the Israeli position in the all-important calculus of

final borders, refugees and the status of Jerusalem" (Matthews xxi).

<p style="text-align: center;">The Friendship: Overstated? And Other Criticisms</p>

However, despite primary and secondary sources that proclaim the significance and

warmth of Bush and Sharon's friendship, other scholars are not so sympathetic. According to

Elliott Abrams, "By the time Sharon's career was ended by a massive stroke in January 2006, a

mythology had developed about his personal relations with President Bush...the story is not false,

but it is exaggerated" (Abrams 11).

Scholar Mark Matthews is perhaps the foremost critic of the exaggeration of the

Bush/Sharon relationship. In his book *Lost Years: Bush, Sharon and Failure in the Middle East,*

Matthews highlights the negative impacts of Bush's policy choices on Israel's strategic security

and prospects for the future:

> In other important ways, it could be argued that Bush was not such
> a good friend to Israel. Israel's strategic environment in some
> respects grew worse under his presidency. Because of the chaos in
> Iraq, the United States now has less leverage over Iran, which is
> viewed by Israel as an existential threat. Not only has Iran's ally
> Hezbollah regained its bearings in Lebanon, but Iran has gained a
> foothold in the West Bank and Gaza with the help of the Hamas-
> led government (Matthews xxii).

Matthews continues by stating, "...After a decade of halting steps toward coexistence and

peace, both Israel and the United States were becoming increasingly alienated from the Arab

world and straining ties with countries elsewhere that had interests in the Middle East"

(Matthews 102).

Finally, Matthews argues that the United States did not take a leading role in the peace

process, but rather acquiesced to Israel's policy choices and actions: "Never before was an

American administration so willing to accept the approach of a right-wing government in Israel.

Far from pushing Israel in the direction of peace, Bush, over time, became increasingly tolerant

of Sharon's tactics of siege, mass arrests, targeted assassinations, and closure – tactics that gave

Israel a short-term advantage over terrorists but fed support for violence even among the

Palestinian mainstream" (Matthews xviii).

> Throughout his first term and well into his second, Bush engaged
> in the Middle East peace process episodically and without success,
> allowing it to be sidetracked by U.S. military adventures, eruptions
> of Israeli-Palestinian violence and terror, and the tug-of-war
> among his subordinates over American priorities. By the time
> Sharon was incapacitated by a stroke on January 4, 2006, a bloody
> five-year impasse had robbed the two peoples of any prospect for
> reconciliation in the near term and plunged Palestinian society into
> a sink of nihilism, poverty, and clan warfare" (Matthews xvi).

Matthews posits that Bush was not involved and did not do enough for peace in the

Middle East. However, other scholars, as well as current popular opinion, might argue would say

that Bush was *too* involved in the Middle East, in the wrong ways. Like Israel's unilateral

disengagement from Gaza, it may be that Israel

> The tragic irony of the story is that Bush sincerely wanted peace in
> the Holy Land and correctly diagnosed some of the key problems
> that stood in the way of that peace. He called more prominently
> and explicitly than his predecessor for a viable Palestinian state on
> contiguous territory. Perhaps more important, symbolically, he
> injected the name used by Palestinians and their supporters –
> Palestine – into official American parlance. He repeatedly
> demanded a halt to the growth of Jewish settlements in occupied
> territory, embraced Palestinian moderates, and pressed for reform
> of Palestinian governance, finances, and security services"
> (Matthews xvii).

As Matthews reflects on the period, he argues that while the potential for peace under

Bush and Sharon certainly existed, the opportunity was squandered. The use of the word

"tragedy" implies that the outcome under Bush and Sharon was the final outcome for the

Israeli/Palestinian system. Though Matthews concludes that the situation was tragic under Bush,

a *single* defeat in the age-old battle for peace in the Middle East should not necessarily be

dismissed as a *final* defeat. Peace may be possible in the future, under different conditions and

different leaders. At this point, however, it is impossible to know whether peace is possible in the

near future. If history and current events are any indication, the outcome seems bleak. But this

bleakness is no excuse to give up on the possibility of peace: after all, if hope does not exist,

there is no incentive to continue to strive for change and lasting peace.

<div align="center">The Future: Implications and Ramifications</div>

The United States and Israel: two nation-states, seemingly so different – the former, an

expansive landmass with a melting pot of races, religions, cultures and a population of around

320 million people; the latter, only 85 miles across at its widest point, with a population of 8

million people, of which around six million share the same religion and culture (Gitlin and

Leibovitz 190). One nation-state is hundreds of years old, while the other has a sector of the

population who are still alive to remember the state's establishment some 65 years ago. Of

course, there are issues of geopolitics and development to consider as well. Yet despite all of

these differences, perhaps the United States and Israel are not so different after all:

> Two nations, two histories, two cultures, two sets of assumptions
> march to the same drummer. At the heart of the special friendship
> between Israel and America lies an extraordinary spiritual-cum-
> ideological bond: their unshakable attachment to the wild idea of
> divine election, which, however dampened, however sublimated,
> continues to ripple beneath the surface of everyday events. Two
> nations that exist in time both cry out for eternity" (Gitlin and
> Leibovitz 190).

Both nations, despite their current definitive and distinctive commitments to democracy,

experienced less-than-democratic foundations at the hands of a small group of leaders: the

Founding Fathers declared their independence from the King and Great Britain in 1776; so too

did David Ben-Gurion and the original founders of the modern state of Israel in 1948. Both

declarations of these new states were done without consultation of, or express consent from, any

residents of the region.

> The tragedy of the Palestinian people is their unrequited suffering,
> which a more responsible, moderate Palestinian leadership and
> more enlightened statesmanship among Muslim and European
> nations could have substantially redressed. The fundamental
> asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has long
> remained this: although there are extremists in Israel such as the
> fanatical settlers on the West Bank who reject any compromise,
> they are a decided minority; the vast majority of Israelis, including
> former Prime Minister Sharon and his successor, Prime Minister
> Olmert, accept the idea of a two-state solution to the conflict.
> Under Arafat the Palestinian leadership did not (Kaufman 44).

This continuation of the "tragedy" rhetoric – from Robert Kaufman, in his book *In*

*Defense of the Bush Doctrine* – does not frame the outcome of the Bush/Sharon relationship as a

tragedy. Rather, it suggests the plight of the Palestinian people, as pawns of an irresponsible

government – is tragic in and of itself. Regardless of this difference, it also suggests that the plight is permanent and cannot be resolved. While this situation may be Palestine's current context, again, it is not necessarily its final context. There may be change in the future – if the Palestinians (and, to a lesser extent), the Israelis take steps to ameliorate conditions.

Mark Matthews notes, "Rarely has history paired leaders with such contrasting backgrounds as George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon" (Matthews 41).  However, like the United States and Israel, though Bush and Sharon seem very different initially, on deeper inspection, they perhaps have more in common than meets the eye. Uri Dan states about Sharon, "Contrary to popular myth, his personal ambition was always subordinate to the national interest" (Sharon 3). Bush was similarly criticized for his personal ambitions (or for having "something to prove," especially in the wake of his father) – but both men ultimately viewed their national offices as a higher calling: beyond any personal gain, but rather to serve a population with guiding principles that built stronger, more secure countries.

Dan goes on to say, "[Sharon's] was a lone voice in the wilderness, but he refused to keep silent" (Sharon 3). In this way, Sharon was similar to President Bush – leaders of principle, dedicated to making strong decisions even in the face of controversy and maintaining support for their decisions even when they were unpopular. It is certainly true that both leaders faced difficult conditions as leaders of their respective countries. They remained undaunted: in fact, Dan states, "Ariel Sharon, prime minister of Israel, knows that if we stand united, we can look to the future with hope" (Sharon 8). Similarly, President Bush stated, at the dedication of his Presidential Library and Center in Dallas, Texas, that he "will always believe that our nation's best days lie ahead" (Boyer). Regardless of the difficulty of circumstances in both the United States and Israel, both nation-states have the capacity to look toward the future with hope.

Conclusion

The power of rhetoric in creating and maintaining personal political and diplomatic relationships should not be understated. Rhetoric may be instrumental in creating a reality that does not actually exist – or at least does not exist *yet*. Rhetoric – intentional and unintentional – certainly impacted the relationship between President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon. Not only did rhetoric strengthen an existing relationship between the United States and Israel, it also strengthened a personal friendship between the two men. However, the rhetoric also had negative ramifications – though it was responsible for drawing the two men, and nations, together, it also had a role in alienating both nations from the rest of the Middle East. Rhetoric was, in large part, responsible for the creation of a period of unprecedented relations between the two nations – one unlike any that had existed previously, and unlike any that currently exists. President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon understood that they could not defend their respective nations "by hoping for the best" – instead, through rhetoric and a close, influential relationship – they attempted to create conditions through which both American and Israeli legitimacy was recognized more fully throughout the world.

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