

POLITICS AND POLICY

Pro-Israel Lobbyists Quietly Backed Resolution Allowing Bush to Commit U.S. Troops to Combat

By DAVID ROGERS

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WASHINGTON — When Congress debated going to war with Iraq, the pro-Israel lobby stayed in the background—but not out of the fight.

Leaders of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee now acknowledge it worked in tandem with the Bush administration to win passage of a resolution authorizing the president to commit U.S. troops to combat. The behind-the-scenes campaign avoided Alpac's customary high profile in the Capitol and relied instead on activists—calling sometimes from Israel itself—to contact lawmakers and build on public endorsements by major Jewish organizations.

"Yes, we were active," says Alpac director Thomas Dine. "These are the great issues of our time. If you sit on the sidelines, you have no voice."

Swing Votes

In the end, pro-Israel lawmakers were divided on the vote. But the lobby's influence nonetheless was crucial, especially in helping the White House pick up Democratic support that has typically been denied to recent presidents in other foreign-policy confrontations such as the covert war in Nicaragua. Democrats who have benefited from large contributions by pro-Israel political action committees were among the swing votes, and the administration says that having pro-Israel liberals behind the resolution made it easier to hold moderate Republicans as well.

One Democrat who voted for the resolution is Nevada Sen. Harry Reid, who received \$155,590 from pro-Israel PACs when

Pro-Israel PACs

Campaign contributions to House and Senate candidates by major pro-Israel political action committees in the 1989-1990 election cycle

National PAC	\$968,500
Washington PAC	262,125
Hudson Valley PAC	220,254
Joint Action Committee For Political Affairs	204,500
Citizens Organized PAC	191,000

Source: Federal Election Commission

he was running for the Senate in 1986. Mr. Reid and other Democrats who voted for the resolution say their votes had nothing to do with the assistance they have received from pro-Israel groups. Still, in states as diverse as Nebraska, Alabama, California and New York, the administration won support by tapping into pro-Israel sentiment; at the very least, the Israel factor reinforced some wavering lawmakers by giving them an opportunity to satisfy an important constituency.

Rarely have the stakes been higher—or has a case of money and ethnic politics been more sensitive and complex. The debate revealed a deep ambivalence among Jewish lawmakers over what course to follow, pitting their generally liberal instincts against their support of Israel. Friends and families were divided. And even as some pro-Israel advocates urged a more aggressive stance, there was concern that the lobby risked damaging Israel's longer-term interests if the issue became too iden-

tified with Jewish or pro-Israel politics.

"American Jews should have no fear in expressing their support for the president of the United States," says Jerry Lippman, editor of the Long Island Jewish World.

Yet Alpac took pains to disguise its role, and there was quiet relief that the vote showed no solid Jewish bloc in favor of a war so relevant to Israel. "It isn't such a bad idea that we were split," says one Jewish lawmaker.

Pulling Together

Iraqi missile attacks on Tel Aviv have since helped to solidify opinion; there is an effort now to pull together in anticipation of costly demands for increased aid to Israel. People on both sides of the issue "had Israel as part of their concern," says Malcolm Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

But the debate has nonetheless left a trail of recriminations and political maneuvering. Republicans see an opportunity in the war vote to drive a wedge between Israel supporters and Democrats. GOP Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, for instance, has chastised pro-Israel Democrats who opposed the war resolution; the Mormon lawmaker recently startled a reporter from the Washington Jewish Week newspaper by unbuttoning his shirt to display a silver mezuzah, locket-like amulet with a Hebrew prayer inside.

New York Republican Sen. Alfonse D'Amato's list of possible re-election foes next year includes state Attorney General Robert Abrams, who is Jewish, and Rep. Robert Mrazek, a pro-Israel Democrat who opposed the war resolution; Sen. D'Amato lately has redoubled his efforts to show support for Israel, making a high-profile appearance at its embassy two weekends ago, traveling to Israel last week and implicitly accusing pro-Israel Democrats of joining "this chorus of 'Let's give Saddam some more time.'"

The pressure to mobilize pro-Israel forces on the Gulf issue came foremost from Rep. Stephen Solarz, the administration's chief Democratic ally in the House. After meeting with the Brooklyn Democrat, leaders of the Reform Jewish Movement approved a statement in December in support of the use of force, despite the misgiving of some members. At a private dinner two weeks later, Mr. Solarz urged Alpac's Mr. Dine to have the group play a larger public role in the debate. The congressman bluntly describes pro-Israel lawmakers who opposed him as "tragically shortsighted" in their understanding of American-Israeli interests.

'Stand Firm'

Among the congressman's allies was his longtime friend, New York attorney Bernard Nussbaum, who serves as finance chairman for Rep. Nita Lowey (D., N.Y.) and is on the advisory board of the Washington Political Action Committee, a pro-Israel PAC. Mr. Nussbaum was part of a strong—albeit unsuccessful—effort by Jewish supporters of Rep. Lowey to convince

her to support the resolution. (Mr. Nussbaum refuses to discuss the matter.) "She came under a lot of pressure," said Richard Maass, a past president of the American Jewish Committee who opposed the war resolution. "My message to her was, 'Stand firm.'"

Like Alpac itself, Mr. Solarz's often-unnoticed strength is his ability to reach beyond his traditional base and find votes among Southern conservatives such as Rep. Ralph Hall, a Texas "Boll Weevil" Democrat who is warmly supportive of the New York congressman—and Israel. More broadly, pro-Israel PACs have poured money into campaigns for Southern Democrats not immediately identified with their cause.

For example, the Alabama delegation voted in a bloc with Mr. Bush in both the House and Senate. At first glance, this can be ascribed to the conservative, pro-military character of the state. But pro-Israel PACs have also cultivated Democrats there in recent years. A total of 25 pro-Israel PACs gave Sen. Howell Heflin \$87,350 toward his re-election in the 1989-1990 election cycle. Federal records also list \$51,375 in contributions from pro-Israel committees to then-Congressman Richard Shelby when he ousted GOP Sen. Jeremiah Denton in 1986.

Nevada is an example of a sparsely populated state where Alpac has maximized its leverage. Richard Bryan, a former governor and ally of Sen. Reid's, received \$86,750 from pro-Israel PACs in 1987-1988—more than seven times the contributions to the man he defeated, GOP incumbent Jacob Hecht, who is himself Jewish. Sen. Bryan voted with President Bush on the war resolution.

Sen. Reid, whose alliance with the pro-Israel lobby goes back to his days on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, says, "I'm sure [Israel] was a factor" in his vote, "but you had a 100 different factors." In deciding, he recalls speaking with three Nevadans: a political science professor, a former governor and war veteran, and Dorothy Eisenberg, a Democratic activist and the treasurer of a pro-Israel PAC based in Las Vegas that has supported him in the past.

Ms. Eisenberg recalls speaking to the senator about her family in Israel, but though she supported the resolution, both she and he say she never lobbied him. "I trust his judgment," she says.

In the case of Tennessee Sen. Albert Gore, another Democrat who voted with the president, the ties with pro-Israel supporters are intellectual as well as political. Just as Israel faces a hostile world, those who support it often come to favor a more muscular foreign policy for the U.S. Mr. Solarz, who personally lobbied Mr. Gore, is part of this school. So is New Republic editor in chief Martin Peretz, who backed the war resolution and is a close friend of the senator as well as a major contributor to the pro-Israel National PAC.

"I wouldn't think this was an Israel-driven vote for him," says Mr. Peretz, and the senator himself agrees. Still, Mr. Gore's vote not only set him apart from many in his party but also raised his profile among Israel supporters. "It will definitely raise his stature," says Morris Amitay, a Washington lobbyist and pro-Israel activist.

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out on the Friday
round table would
have been a service
to Americans who
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