

Jeffrey Blankfort: Chomsky Misfires on US-Israel Relations (Part 3)

Jeffrey Blankfort has been writing extensively on the Israel-Palestine conflict since working as a photojournalist in the 1970s, photographing the Palestinian refugee camps.

Last July, Blankfort participated in a conference on Israel's nuclear weapons held at the Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., and sponsored by the Institute for Research: Middle East Policy.

Currently, he hosts a program on international affairs called "Takes On The World" for KZYX, the public radio station of Mendocino County, California.

Kathleen Wells: I interview members of Congress. Do you think I can get any members of Congress to sit down and have an interview with me about this issue?

Jeffrey Blankfort: Well, you could probably get ex-members of Congress. Once somebody is out of Congress, they're usually more willing to talk about it. Lynn Woolsey in Marin County told a group of visiting constituents, including my sister a couple of years ago, that half the people in Congress are afraid of AIPAC or they hate AIPAC, and they're intimidated by AIPAC. And then Congressman Henry Waxman from Los Angeles, who's the liberals' darling but is a hatchet man for AIPAC within Congress, told Woolsey that if somebody opposed her in the Democratic primary who's a serious candidate, they would support that person because of a couple of votes she had taken against the AIPAC position.

And we have Maxine Waters, now under investigation in Los Angeles for a charge that is nothing compared to what so many members of Congress have done to enrich their own pocketbooks. But Maxine Waters made a couple of mistakes. Back in, actually, 1991, when Congress was supporting loan

guarantees for Israel, she tried to circulate a petition among her fellow members of Congress for loan guarantees for American cities at a time when the economy was hurting. She only got 38 signatures, and then under pressure, she pulled it. That was also never reported in [the] American media, but I did report it in my *Middle East Labor Bulletin*.

Then in 2004, when Cynthia McKinney was running to get back into Congress, Maxine Waters went to Atlanta, Georgia, to speak on behalf of McKinney, where I interviewed her, and recently she has taken some votes that AIPAC doesn't like. And so now she is in their crosshairs or the crosshairs of the House Ethics Committee, which might as well be speaking for the Israel lobby.

Kathleen Wells: Why do you say that? Why do you say the House Ethics Committee is speaking for the Israeli lobby?

Jeffrey Blankfort: Well, because there are a number of unethical positions that have been taken by members of Congress who are very strong supporters of Israel over the years who have not found themselves targeted. I mean, when you find members of Congress, particularly in the Senate Banking and Finance Committee, getting millions of dollars in contributions from the savings and loans and banks, and so on, and becoming millionaires by the time they get out of Congress, some real questions need to be asked, but they're never asked.

Kathleen Wells: Haven't you written a book or a pamphlet called, "If Americans Only Knew?" Did you write something like that?

Jeffrey Blankfort: No. Actually, *If Americans Knew* is a website -- excellent website -- which has some of my articles and information about how the Zionist lobby influences United States politics and the media. *If Americans Knew* is run by an activist named Alison Weir, and I recommend that to all of your listeners.

Kathleen Wells: Speak to me about how the American labor unions have been influenced by the lobbies.

Jeffrey Blankfort: One of the cornerstones of the support for Israel in this country has been the American labor unions, which were predominantly Jewish in leadership because of Jewish activity in labor unions in the 30s and 40s. So they were early supporters of the State of Israel. And it was interesting, in 1983 there was an article in the *Hadassah Courier* -- Hadassah being *the* leading Jewish women's organization -- which began, as I recall, saying in the lobby of the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, there is a bust of Golda Meir, the former Prime Minister of Israel, and that's not surprising because, next to the organized Jewish community, the strongest support for Israel has been from American labor unions. And the article goes on to talk about the millions of dollars in State of Israel bonds that the American labor unions have purchased with their members' dues, but their members aren't aware of this. The article, by the way, was written by Wolf Blitzer, who is a former staff member of AIPAC, now frequently seen on *CNN*. He also wrote for the *Jerusalem Post*.

What happens is you have about 1,700 labor unions who have invested in State of Israel bonds, which obliges them to be lobbyists for Israel on the basis that, as long as the Israeli economy is in good shape, their bonds are in good shape; but if the Israeli economy will go south, so will their investments. The Israeli bond corporation, which is part of the Israel government, has sold State of Israel bonds to about half the states in the union, to many, many pension funds, and most of their members are not aware of it. It is very difficult to get this information -- who exactly owns what and how much -- unless you have an inside or an in with these organizations.

Kathleen Wells: How did you become aware of it?

Jeffrey Blankfort: When I read this article in 1983 by Wolf Blitzer, it was

what encouraged me to accept the suggestion of my friend, Steve Zeltzer -- who is also Jewish, a labor union activist -- to form the Labor Committee on the Middle East and start doing research on the labor unions' ties with Israel. And they are very, very strong.

The AFL-CIO is the lone international labor union that has not taken a position supporting Palestinian workers. They are very close to the Israeli Labor Federation, Histadrut, which is discriminating against Palestinian workers and is historically part of the Israeli problem. They were the main organization that organized the businesses and industries of pre-state Israel. It also had close ties with South Africa during the apartheid regime.

Kathleen Wells: You've mentioned that you disagree with Chomsky's views regarding the boycott, divestment and sanction tactics/strategies. Recently, I know that California launched a BDS campaign. Elaborate on how you and Chomsky differ and the recent campaign launched in California.

Jeffrey Blankfort: Well, actually, I believe Professor Chomsky endorses the campaign launched in California recently to get on the ballot next year. What Chomsky opposes is Israel itself being a target for sanctions -- Israeli companies, Israeli cultural -- actors, actresses, musicians, and so on -- academics. This boycott ... A boycott of Israel totally has been called for by representatives of Palestine's ... Palestinian civil society.

They believe that this should be the same kind of boycott that was inflicted on South Africa and helped to end apartheid there. What Professor Chomsky and many of those who support him and live in this country believe [is] that the boycott divestments and sanctions should *only* be targeted on companies and businesses that invest or are active in the occupied territory that participate in

the oppression and occupation of the Palestinians. So the question is: Is Israel allowed to get off the hook? And the Palestinian civil society says no.

Professor Chomsky believes that for Americans to support that position is hypocritical because they should be calling for a boycott of the United States, since Professor Chomsky believes that Israel only does actions that are authorized by the United States and that Israel is not the main culprit but the United States is. And I beg to differ with him on that.

Also, he believes that those who support targeting Israel are actually harming the Palestinian cause -- that includes the Palestinian themselves -- because this information, this attitude, would be used by hardliners within Israel and the United States to damage the Palestinian cause. There's been no evidence of that, and he gives no example of that.

So this is an important difference between Professor Chomsky and I, between Professor Chomsky and the Palestinian Civil society. Many organizations are calling for an international boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel, which is supported around the world by a number of trade unions, a number of cultural actors and actresses -- people who've been involved in the anti-apartheid work and see the same kind of struggle taking place in trying to bring Israel to its knees.

Kathleen Wells: So California is the first state in the United States that has launched a BDS campaign. Talk to me ... Give me some specifics how this program, this campaign, will be launched.

Jeffrey Blankfort: As I understand it, it was launched in Los Angeles by a group of people, pro-Palestinian supporters, and the idea is to let the American or the California citizenry vote as to whether state pension funds in California should be required to divest from investments that they have in Israel that

benefits Israel's occupation of Palestine. Not Israel per se, but Israel's occupation of Palestine.

They need 400,000 signatures to get it on the ballot next year, and it will be the first kind of a campaign of its type and what is ... It will be mightily opposed by the Israel lobby and probably by all of the nation -- nationwide media, not just California media. And we expect to see all kinds of money and activity coming in to try and stop this event, but if we could get 400,000 signatures to put this on the ballot -- it is a possibility to educate the public about this issue in a way they've never been educated before.

Kathleen Wells: Now, when you make this distinction between they're not campaigning against Israel per se, but rather Israel's occupation of Gaza ...

Jeffrey Blankfort: Well, no, occupation of the West Bank. And of course, it's not officially of Gaza, but Gaza has a large prison camp which they control. It's essentially ... it's the same, but they have no investments in Gaza. But there are a number of American businesses, companies -- Caterpillar, Motorola, IBM, Intel -- have investments in the occupied territories, do business there. There are millions of dollars involved in investing in Israel -- in the occupied territories -- and so the idea is to cause those institutions that have those investments to divest them. I think they're talking about the state institutions, not private institutions.

Kathleen Wells: Oh, state institutions.

Jeffrey Blankfort: Right.

Kathleen Wells: I'm just trying to figure out how you make this distinction between not campaigning against Israel per se, as opposed to Israel's occupation of the West Bank. How do you draw that distinction? I'm not clear on it.

Jeffrey Blankfort: I don't actually draw that distinction. Probably to get more people to sign this, it would seem that Israel itself is not being punished but just Israel's occupation. However, supporters of Israel will treat this as if it was Israel itself because they are now propagating a campaign around the world saying that the boycott, divestment and sanction movement is a movement to de-legitimize Israel. And, of course, there's nothing in any of the statements that say that. What is being de-legitimized is a country that occupies other people's land for decades, and if Israel has a problem with its own legitimacy, so do many other people, among them myself.

Kathleen Wells: Because to say it's not against Israel, but Israel *is* occupying the West Bank, so I don't see...

Jeffrey Blankfort: Yes. So the idea is to only punish that aspect of Israel, those investments that are directly in the West Bank, those companies that have businesses or factories in the West Bank, or those companies that produce materials, like Caterpillar and their bulldozers that are used to demolish Palestinian homes; they have a special bulldozer for that.

And so there's been a long campaign, which has not been very successful so far, to get Caterpillar to not sell its bulldozers to Israel. And this is kind of an escalation of that.

Kathleen Wells: And then how will California residents be involved? What ... say, assuming they get the requisite number of signatures, what is that? 400,000?

Jeffrey Blankfort: Something like that.

Kathleen Wells: Yeah. And they get those signatures and then will it be

California residents asking that their pension funds ...

Jeffrey Blankfort: There are a number of state pension funds, and those pension funds were the ones that would have to divest. That would also include the universities, I presume. I'm not sure of all the details. I haven't read the fine print. But I assume any state institution that invested in any business that did business in the occupied territories or contributed to enhancing or maintaining the occupation would be a legitimate target. And they would have to divest those funds if the voters of California approved that.

Kathleen Wells: Now we talked dramatically about the pro-Israel influence with Democrats in D.C. Elaborate on this notion how this influence -- this pro-Israel influence -- in D.C. is also ... whether or not it's a bipartisan effort?

Jeffrey Blankfort: There is probably no more bipartisan effort on a critical issue -- not a Mother's day resolution or a resolution to thank our veterans. There is no other issue in which both political parties have historically marched in locked step with one another. So you have Senator Boxer here in California arm-in-arm with former Senator Jesse Helms. The most right-wing racist senators, congressmen, and the most liberal of Democrats march arm-in-arm when it comes to pledging their allegiance to Israel. The Democrats get the most money, but the Republicans, now, in more recent years, get money from Christian-Zionists, who are even more zealous than so many Jewish Zionists about Israel maintaining every inch of the West Bank and even more.

But what happens if you are a Republican and you step out of line and you criticize Israel, you will be targeted. Then the three famous cases of Charles Percy -- Senator Charles Percy of Illinois, who was very pro-Israel -- I mean he was also ... believed the Palestinians should have their rights.

When he, in 1981, voted for what they call the AWACS, the Advanced Air Warning System, to sell this advanced warning system to Saudi Arabia which would protect it from hostile attack, President Reagan lobbied personally to get Charles Percy to change his vote. And Charles Percy changed his vote and voted for AWACS to sell to Saudi Arabia and it passed. And the Israel lobby organization – AIPAC -- then targeted Charles Percy -- deliberately, openly, publicly -- to get some congressman [Paul Simon] to run against him. And they succeeded and Percy was defeated.

There was another Illinois congressman, Paul Findley, who also spoke favorably of the Palestinians. He later wrote a book about it called "They Dared to Speak Out". He was also targeted. "They Dared to Speak Out" was a story of what happens to people in this country -- not just politicians, but teachers and so on -- who have dared to publicly speak out against the Israel lobby and the policies of the State of Israel.

Finally, there was my lawyer, Pete McCloskey, a marine veteran from California who openly supported the Palestinians [in Congress]. He supported Israel, he supported two-state solution before it was acceptable. There was a time when anyone who supported two states was considered anti-Israel. Twenty years ago, if you called for two states, you were anti-Israel. Pete McCloskey called for two states; he was targeted. So Republicans know, just like Democrats, that if they speak out against Israel or are critical of Israel policy, they are going to be just as much of a target as a Democrat.

So what you see are these 400 to four votes, 99 to one in the Senate. The *one* now is dead -- the late Bobby Byrd, Robert Byrd. So the votes now will be 100 to nothing when it comes to pro-Israel positions. It's a pretty ugly situation. There's no other issue that is of such importance to America and to the world in which both houses of the U.S. Congress come together. No parliament in France, England, anywhere else is like this, even those countries that support

Israel. There's nothing comparable to this, because they don't have the money in their politics that we have in ours.

Kathleen Wells: So you're saying that it used to be 99 to one with the late Senator Byrd being the only senator that would vote against Israel on legislation?

Jeffrey Blankfort: Or any issue that might involve Israel, critical of Israel. Byrd was the only one who would do that. He was well-liked and well-loved. He brought a lot of money back to West Virginia. He took care of West Virginia very well and so he was not the kind of person that AIPAC would think of attacking. They just ignored him. He would make statements on the floor of Congress critical of Israel, and the newspapers would not publish them.

Kathleen Wells: Okay. This is my last question, I promise. What prescriptions can you offer for an effective pro-Palestinian movement?

Jeffrey Blankfort: We need to recognize that, as someone once said, "All politics is local," and the Israeli-Palestine issue is no exception.

When we have schools firing teachers, when we have healthcare limited, when we don't have universal healthcare, when we have serious economic problems in all our communities, all our localities, the notion that we are contributing, giving money to Israel ... They're not buying these weapons with their money. That we are giving them the money to buy these weapons [is outrageous]. And we are fighting wars that they want -- sending our soldiers to fight and die and kill innocent people on an agenda that was Israel's before it was ours.

Members of Congress [who] support that they should be targeted and exposed with the speeches that they have made. It's all available online. You go to the AIPAC website, *aipac.org*, and you look at all the letters that have been sent to

various persons by members of Congress over the years, it's all there. It's not secret. And those members of Congress should be held to account. And I'm sure, for example, if the American public could have heard the speech of Andrew Shapiro, which I played for my listeners -- and it enraged them -- to the Brookings Institution about the U.S.-Israel relationship, they would be enraged.

But the point is we have to speak to ordinary Americans who have no vested interests in the outcome in the Middle East, either Jewish or Arab Americans. This is an issue that is the responsibility of all Americans. This is what needs to be done and, of course, Israel itself should be targeted. Israeli institutions should be targeted.

We didn't bring up the example of the *USS Liberty*, the ship that was attacked and [almost] sunk by the Israelis in 1967 in which 34 sailors were killed and 171 wounded [during] more than an hour of attacks, and the survivors were not allowed to talk about it by President Johnson under penalty of court martial. The American public doesn't know about that. But my experience is, when I talk to people about the *Liberty*, they do get angry, and they would get angrier if they knew what Israel has been doing with our support.

I would like to bring up the role of certain members of Congress who consider themselves to be agents of Israel rather than United States. And there was one I wrote about named Steven Solarz, who back in 1980 sent his constituents very proudly a letter in which he wrote ... It was titled, "Delivering for Israel," and I quote. He said, "It is a story of how legislative maneuvering and political persistence managed to prevail over physical constraints and bureaucratic resistance." This is how they got an additional \$660 million in foreign aid for Israel and how, he said, "given that this was an election year."

He also wrote to his constituents, largely Jewish at the time, I quote. He said, "We also gently suggested to the Secretary Cyrus Vance that we were prepared to take the fight for increase in aid to the floor of Congress. That it might put

the administration in an election year in a bad light with some of its most important constituencies if it would be seen to be opposing in an effort to help Israel."

And then, shortly thereafter, Secretary Vance [said] the administration had decided to recommend an increase of from \$1 billion to \$1.2 billion in additional military assistance, but to keep at the same level -- \$785 million -- the amount of economic assistance for Israel. So an additional half of a billion dollars of U.S. money went to Israel as a result of the pressure of Steven Solarz and his fellow agents for Israel in the U.S. Congress in 1980, when the U.S. economy was in the doldrums as it is today.

Kathleen Wells: As it is today.

Jeffrey Blankfort: And you have the same thing happening today, 30 years later, except Solarz is no longer in Congress. We have Howard Berman. We have Charles Schumer. We have Jane Harman. We have Henry Waxman. We have Eric Cantor. We have Eric Weiner, Eliot Engle, Gerald Nadler, and I could keep on and on and on.

Kathleen Wells: And why hasn't there been a national campaign to educate Americans about U.S. aid to Israel and an attempt to end it?

Jeffrey Blankfort: Well, there is an organization. There are campaigns, but they're not conducted with enthusiasm, and they don't have the enthusiastic support of people in the solidarity movement who believe that the problem is U.S. imperialism and not Israel.

In their slogans, they keep repeating, "End the occupation. End the occupation."

I would say that the majority of Americans, if you ask them on the street, and you say “End the occupation,” they won't know what you're talking about. But if you say, “Stop aid to Israel” and you tell them how much money is involved, particularly at this point in time, they would put their heads up, and they would wonder, and they would be concerned, especially when after-school programs are being cut and when their teachers are no longer able to get jobs. And when they themselves are out of work.

Kathleen Wells: Well, I think we've covered quite a bit, don't you?

Jeffrey Blankfort: I think we have.

Kathleen Wells: [laughter] So on that note, I want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me and ...

Jeffrey Blankfort: Kathleen, it has been my pleasure.

Kathleen Wells: Okay, thank you very much.

Jeffrey Blankfort: Thank you so much. Take care.

Kathleen Wells: Okay, bye.
