



FEIN ON PERCY

“General Brown, Arafat, the UN Commission on Human Rights, UNESCO . . . and now Percy.” So goes the increasingly conventional litany of recent Jewish reversal.

The issues raised by the Percy affair are important in and of themselves, but still more important for what they say about both the mood and the wisdom of the Jews. In an effort to sort out some of the issues, MOMENT met last month with Senator Charles Percy.

The meeting took place in the immediate aftermath of the Savoy Hotel outrage. Under the circumstances, Percy might comfortably have used the opportunity to back away from his statement of January 28 that had caused so much consternation in the Jewish community, the statement whose central aspect dealt with Arafat’s “moderation.”

The facts of the original episode are these: Senator Percy returned from a 12 country tour of the Middle East late in January. On the morning of January 28, he attended a press breakfast, where he delivered himself of a number of comments on his trip which appear to have been unprepared, and not even very carefully considered. One such comment was that Yassir Arafat is a “relative moderate” — that is, as he later explained, that Arafat “is more moderate than the PLO leadership who

would likely replace him were he removed.”

That afternoon, the front page of the *Chicago Daily News* carried a banner headline, announcing, “Percy Tells Israel: Don’t Count on U.S.,” followed by an article under the by-line of respected journalist Peter Lisagor. Lisagor reported that Percy had termed Arafat a “moderate” (omitting the qualification), and implied that the Percy comments amounted to a major reversal of his earlier position as “a strong supporter of Israel.”

The reaction was almost immediate, and it was intense. The modest distortion of the actual comment regarding Arafat surely helped exacerbate the matter, but there was enough additional evidence of a Percy shift to cause legitimate concern that we were witness to a major defection from the pro-Israel ranks.

But if, as some of the comments suggested, Percy had stumbled into the matter rather thoughtlessly, and if, as he told us during our meeting, he was “surprised and upset at the extent and the intensity of the reaction,” might not the Savoy Hotel matter offer him a way back, and out?

Percy did not use the opportunity. Instead, he chose to defend his earlier comments, and, wrapping himself in the statesman’s mantle, to express gratification that he had “initiated an important dialogue, one that has been postponed too long.” Percy believes, “there has never been a better time, and there is not likely to be a better time, to move towards peace in the Middle East,” and the belief apparently runs quite deep. That belief is founded on his respect for Kissinger, Sadat and Rabin, and, in particular, on his conviction that the respect with

which Kissinger is viewed in the Arab world has created a unique opportunity. And he is distressed that some of the conditions which he views as essential in any movement towards peace — notably, an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue — are not now viewed as acceptable by the relevant parties, or by their supporters in this country.

Accordingly, while expressing appropriate regret about continuing terrorist attacks, he views them as additional support for the position that peace is an urgent necessity.

Does all this mean a shift in Percy’s past position—and, if so, from what to what? Lobbyists familiar with these matters allege that Percy has always been a somewhat sluggish friend, and at least one very prominent lobbyist publicly asserted that he was not surprised by Percy’s statement, since Percy had “never been a friend of Israel.”

Here it is necessary to distinguish between friends and advocates. In his statements and in his votes, Percy has, over the years, been unmistakably friendly to Israel. It is also true that he has never been an enthusiastic champion, an advocate of Israel’s cause, but that may well be because he has not been much of an initiator or an advocate in any area. Charles Percy’s prominence as a senator derives chiefly from his inclusion in an exclusive group of Americans who are thought to be potential presidential nominees. There is only a very loose correlation between senatorial competence and “presidentiality” — that is, the ability to have oneself taken seriously as a presidential prospect. In Percy’s case, his impeccable dress, his remarkably sonorous voice, his legendary business success, and his evident ability to attract cross-



Photos/Tim Murphy

over voters—as well, of course, as his prominence in the small moderate wing of his party—appear to have contributed more to his national visibility and prospects than his record as a United States senator, which is rather indifferent.

Nonetheless, whether because of personal conviction or demographic and political calculation, or a combination of the two, Percy has been a friend to Israel in the past, and, by his own admission, his views on several aspects of the Middle East problem were, indeed, changed by his visit to that part of the world. He argues, however, that the change involves no diminution of support for Israel, but, instead, a new assessment of the conditions which may lead to peace in the Middle East, hence also of Israel's best interests. In that context, he has proposed that Israel talk with the PLO, and, in the course of his meeting with the press, as in subsequent interviews, has delivered himself of a variety of other notions regarding the conflict and its resolution, some remarkably fuzzy, none especially shocking.

Not shocking? Not, that is, if one follows the debate within Israel on these matters. The issue of whether or not Israel should talk publicly with the PLO (obviously there is already some private contact between the two) is not, centrally, a moral question; it is a political question, and its answer depends on intricate political analysis. Important Israelis — members of the Knesset, ex-generals, others — believe that such talks would benefit Israel. Others — most — disagree.

Why, then, the reaction? Outrage, disappointment, bitter invective, organized letter-writing campaigns, and, most of all, the addition of Percy to the informal enemies list we all maintain. Yet Charles Percy is no enemy of Israel. At the very worst, he is a friend in error. His public record and his private comments provide no adequate reason to denounce him. He speaks movingly of his be-

lief in Israel's sovereignty, and he spoke of it in every Arab capital which he visited. He speaks movingly of the Holocaust, and recalls his own visit to Auschwitz with emotion. He speaks sadly, yet with understanding, of the Jewish reaction to his shift.

So, why? Is it because, rubbed as raw as we have been these past months, frustrated by our inability to make our voices heard in the councils of the mighty, we leap at a handy opportunity to vent our feelings? Or is it, more maturely, because we recognize that the beginning of an erosion may presage a genuine defection? (Indeed there were hints in Percy's comments that he might be less positive in the months ahead with respect to aid for Israel.) The letters and representations which Percy has received over the weeks since his original statement (some 15,000 letters at last count) are diverse. Some express sorrow, more anger. In any event, the spontaneous reactions of large numbers of Jews on matters such as this, except as they deal in ugly invective—as many do—are signs of a lively community. The issue is not really that reaction, but the psychological response, the effect of the episode on our morale.

Three issues, in that connection: First, if any deviation from pro-Israel orthodoxy elicits so sharp a response, do we not insure that the objects of the response will become exactly what we say they are? To call all those who are not orthodox enthusiasts outright enemies is—just possibly—to engage in self-fulfilling hypothesizing. (Percy, for example, now believes that he has “lost the Jews” for good. Is that what we wanted?)

Second: If deviation from pro-

Israel orthodoxy is a source of such acute disappointment, do we not insure still more disappointment in the months ahead? For nothing is more certain than that some of the traditional orthodoxies are now going to be debated, and vigorously. Do we not suffer from enough actual injury without having to convert modest insult into still more injury? Self-protection alone requires a healthier sense of balance.

Third: And do we really demand of others an orthodoxy which we ourselves, in the privacy of our own living rooms, do not accept? Or is it that we ourselves have become so rigid that discussion and debate are *verboden*? Is it what Percy said, or is it that it was Percy doing the saying? If the former, woe unto our narrowness. And if the latter, how can we, and why should we, inhibit public debate on matters where we know opinions differ? How do we look, and how do we feel, when we insist that our friends and the beneficiaries of our support not know, or pretend they do not know, that which we do know: that reasonable people differ in their assessment of how peace may be brought to the Middle East?

There is only one divide which cannot be crossed, which genuinely separates our friends from our enemies, and that is the acceptance of Israel's sovereignty as a Jewish state. On the question of how that sovereignty can best be assured, there will be—there are—sharp differences. But if we say of a man who has said, “there can be no compromise and no sacrifice of the principle of Israel's sovereignty,” and on that principle “the United States should and will walk with Israel every step of the way, no matter what the costs,” that he is an enemy, we are insured a lonely, a friendless future. ★



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