

Introduction

EISENHOWER AND THE REVELATIONS OF SINAI

ON A GLIMMERING October afternoon in 1965, Max Martin Fisher was driving through the autumn-gold Pennsylvania hills to the Gettysburg farm of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Fisher had an appointment to see Eisenhower in connection with his position as general chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, a national organization that, in coordination with local federations, raises funds for immigration to Israel and for Jews in distress around the world. The year, 1965, was the twentieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. To honor the anniversary, Fisher and the executive vice president of the UJA, Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman, conceived of a medal that would be awarded to three military leaders — one from France, Britain and the United States — who played a pivotal part in rescuing the remnants of Europe's Jews. Fisher was driving to the farm to invite Eisenhower to accept the medal.

At fifty-seven, Fisher was still physically impressive. He was six-foot-two; his weight fluctuated between 200 and 230 pounds, his burly chest and wide shoulders recalling his days as a football lineman at Ohio State University in the late 1920s. In 1959, he had merged his Aurora Gasoline Company with Ohio Oil (later to become the Marathon Oil Company), earning himself and his partners \$40 million. Since then, he had been immersed in philanthropic fund-raising. By nature, however, Fisher was not suited for the whirl of socializing and speech making that accompanied his style of philanthropy.

He seemed friendly enough, with a broad open face and a firm handshake, yet he wrestled with an innate shyness. He tended to slouch and to swallow his sentences. Despite a boyish optimism about most everyone around him — a legacy of his small-town boyhood in Salem, Ohio — Fisher's inclination was to remain distant, enveloped by a gentle elusive sadness. Even when he smiled there was a melancholy remoteness in his eyes that his family, friends and colleagues noticed, but could not explain.

As of late, Fisher had carried his fund-raising expertise into Republican Party politics. In 1962, he helped George W. Romney become governor of Michigan; he helped Romney win again in 1964, and, now the popular governor was being touted as a front-runner for the party's 1968 presidential nomination. By 1965, Fisher's first year as general chairman of the UJA, his speeches began to blend philanthropy and politics as the interests themselves coalesced in his mind. Fisher believed that Jewish philanthropic organizations, if politically unified, represented a constituency with the proven capability of gleaning millions of dollars, the key to a successful presidential campaign. Fisher, a consummate proponent of the practical, embraced — and repeatedly quoted — the observation of the nineteenth-century statesman, Otto von Bismarck, who professed that "politics is the art of the possible." Logically, it followed that Fisher had to uncover *what* was possible for an American Jew. There was the worn road of serving as a fund-raiser for a candidate and, if he won, collecting your quid pro quo by accepting a slot within the administration. This was, for instance, how Henry Morgenthau Sr. won his ambassadorship to Turkey from President Woodrow Wilson.

At gut level, Fisher found the notion of an official role in an administration unappealing. As far back as high school and college, when he was involved with prom committees and theater groups, Fisher preferred to work in the background, and typically, on the business side. Beyond the emotional unattractiveness, Fisher sensed — and in this he was significantly different from Morgenthau Sr. — that to take a titled post would curb his ability, especially in the event of a crisis,

to make his voice heard at the White House. As a member of an administration he would owe his boss — the president or the secretary of state — his allegiance, and one who too often disagrees with his boss soon finds himself without a job, and thereby, no voice at all.

Eventually, Fisher opted to become, in the words of Malcolm Hoenlein, who in 1989 was serving as the executive director of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, "the dean of American Jewry." This deanship, however, was well in the future. Fisher's choices in 1965 were far from clear. All he had was an undefined vision of carving out a niche for himself as an insider-outsider amid the overlapping rings of power. He realized that he required an official platform in a *unified* Jewish community to have any chance of influencing an administration on behalf of that community. Fisher would have these platforms, several simultaneously, during his career. The UJA general chairmanship was a giant step. Abraham J. Karp, in *To Give Life*, his study of the UJA's shaping of the American Jewish community, writes: "It is significant . . . that [Fisher's] first position of national leadership was in the UJA. It was the one enterprise which could serve as both coalescing agent and the fountainhead of united Jewish communal enterprise."

When it came to national politics, the question remained: how large a role could he play unofficially in an administration? Surely, if you raised an impressive amount of money, you could get yourself invited to dinners at the White House. You could take a wide-eyed gaze at princes and prime ministers and have your photograph snapped with the president and maybe impress some in your social circle who didn't know how the game was played by having the photo autographed and framed and then hanging it conspicuously in your den. But what did that mean? Nothing. Presidential campaign chests were swelled by this ploy. You traded money for prestige, for a seat near the king, and were granted everything you ever wanted — except influence. Perhaps Morgenthau Sr.'s choice had been the only choice. When you stripped away the

pomp of protocol, what possible chance did even "a dean of American Jewry" have of influencing a president?

For the moment, the answer appeared to be none.

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By the time Fisher called on Eisenhower, the former president was nearing his seventy-fifth birthday and in frail health. After leaving the presidency, he claimed to be "bone tired," and chose to emulate George Washington at Mount Vernon by retiring to the bucolic joys of a 500-acre farm on the edge of the Civil War battlefield. The chief crop was hay, which was used as winter feed for the Angus cattle that roamed the fields. His colonial house was elegantly furnished, and Eisenhower passed the hours on the glass-enclosed sun porch, where he could read or paint or, on occasion, receive visitors.

Fisher, upon entering the house, was directed to the porch. Eisenhower stood and Fisher shook hands with him. In spite of his poor health, the former president maintained the erect posture of a military man. Since the mid-1950s, Fisher had thought that the popular perception of Eisenhower as an inactive president was woefully off the mark. He felt that Eisenhower exhibited a devout — yet prudent — willingness to confront the Russians and demonstrated strong leadership by ordering troops in to ensure the desegregation of the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Fisher took a seat and presented his proposal. Eisenhower listened. Then he began to reminisce about his efforts to aid the Jewish displaced persons in Europe during 1945. He promised Fisher that he would make every effort to come to New York and accept the medal.

In retirement, the former president kept a keen eye on Republican Party politics, and his advice and endorsements were coveted by candidates and officeholders. He was aware of Fisher's burgeoning reputation as a fund-raiser for the GOP, and so it was only natural that their talk turned to how the party would heal itself in the aftermath of Senator Barry M.

Goldwater's resounding defeat in the 1964 presidential election.

Their discussion went on for a while and, Fisher remembers, gradually veered toward the Middle East, with Eisenhower recalling the 1956 Suez Crisis. The former president's reminiscences proved to be a major turning point in Fisher's life.

For American Jews and for many in Israel, the Suez Crisis, while somewhat of a forgotten conflict when compared to the euphoric Israeli victories in 1948 and 1967, and the somber reaction to the heavy casualties of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, had immense geopolitical ramifications for the United States and Israel. On July 26, 1956, Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser declared that he was nationalizing the Suez Canal and its future revenues would be applied to the construction of the Aswan Dam. Nasser, writes historian Howard M. Sachar, "was hailed as a national hero. His domestic position had never been more secure, nor his reputation in the Arab world higher." The initial reaction to the nationalization in Western capitals was outrage. Yet by the fall of 1956, Eisenhower thought the dilemma was behind him, and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles agreed. The French, however, devised a covert plan to attack Egypt, convincing the British and Israelis to join them. Israel would land paratroopers near the Suez Canal. The French and British would demand that both sides withdraw. Nasser, his stature among the Arabs on the line, would refuse, thus providing France and Britain with a pretext to strike.

On Monday, October 29, Israel attacked. Eisenhower was livid; he had been tricked by his allies. He thought their strategy would invite the Soviet Union into the fray and the United States would be forced to bail everyone out. The British and French issued their ultimatum for withdrawal. When Nasser declined to heed it, the British and French bombed Egyptian airfields. Eisenhower contacted Britain's Prime Minister Anthony Eden via transatlantic telephone and vented his outrage in a spate of language more familiar to an enlisted men's barracks than to the stately rooms of 10 Downing

Street. On Wednesday, Eisenhower sent an ominous message to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion: "Despite the present temporary interests that Israel has in common with France and Britain, you ought not to forget that the strength of Israel and her future are bound up with the United States."

The Israelis did not withdraw, and by November 5, they controlled the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Two days later, Eisenhower's warnings to Jerusalem became more menacing. He said that there could be severe repercussions if Israel did not evacuate the Sinai and Gaza, a combination of U.N. condemnations, counterattacks by Soviet "volunteers," the termination of all U.S. governmental aid and philanthropic assistance — a move that included the threat of a Justice Department investigation into the tax-exempt status of the United Jewish Appeal and other charities that furnished funds vital to Israel's survival.

Eisenhower's arm-twisting was effective.

The following morning, Ben-Gurion announced that Israel would withdraw.

Richard M. Nixon, who as vice president under Eisenhower was close to the Suez Crisis, recalls his boss's thinking in 1956.

"Eisenhower," says Nixon, "never had any illusions about Nasser. First, there were Nasser's unpolitic statements at that time — to put it mildly. And there were so many interests to consider: we had French interests, British interests, Israeli interests. But what really happened in 1956 was that it came at a very bad time politically. It came right after the Hungarian revolution, after we had bashed [Soviet Premier Nikita] Khrushchev as the 'Butcher of Budapest' [for ordering Russian troops into Hungary]. So it was difficult to say, 'Well, we're going to support our own people when they are doing the same thing.' Although ours was justified — and the two were not the same — nevertheless, it was difficult. The second thing is that it came shortly before an election, which we were going to win anyway as it later turned out. But on the other hand it was an election in which we were running on the platform of 'peace and prosperity.' And so all of these fac-

tors led to Eisenhower's decision to force the Israelis out."

Eisenhower's forcing the Israelis' hand so close to the election brought the American Jewish community to the polls in record number. In his study, *Political Cohesion of American Jews in American Politics*, M.S. El Azhary records that over 90 percent of American Jews who were registered to vote came to the polls in the 1956 presidential election, 74 percent of them voting for Eisenhower's Democratic opponent, Adlai E. Stevenson.

This illustration of an expansive unified Jewish vote, with Israel as the central motivating component, would be a major factor in Fisher's future — as well as for Nixon and all ensuing presidents. Eisenhower, though, chose to ignore the concerns of American Jews.

In the 1956 race, Stevenson used Eisenhower's stance to swing voters, insisting that the Israelis ought to be given the arms required to guarantee their territorial integrity. His strategy did not pay off. On November 6, Eisenhower defeated him by more than 9 million popular votes.

Although Eisenhower did not require the American Jewish community's support at the polls, he did try to operate through "Jewish channels" to influence Ben-Gurion. But Eisenhower had not developed alliances within the power structure of the American Jewish community, which weakened his efforts. Eisenhower's dealings with America's Jews and the Israelis were most conspicuous for what was missing: a reliable conduit between the Oval Office and the community, someone who could have functioned as a diplomatic navigator between Washington and Jerusalem.

Beyond domestic politics lay the question of whether or not Eisenhower made the correct decision, because the geopolitical fallout from his actions was profound.

Nixon explains: "The French, of course, had their problems [with foreign policy]. But the British are very sophisticated in foreign affairs. They had been our close allies not only [in the Middle East], but all over the world. What happened at Suez split the British wide open. The people who disagreed about Suez in Britain still won't speak to each other.

But it was also the beginning of Britain withdrawing as a world power east of Suez. As of the present time [June 9, 1989], you have Britain with a very strong leader in Margaret Thatcher who plays a very significant role, but not nearly the role that could be played if Britain were still a major player. After Suez, the writing was on the wall."

The implications were equally great for the United States. Even though they were not apparent until eleven years later — on the heels of Israel's Six-Day War — they drastically altered the American role in the Middle East.

"As a result," says Nixon, "of our turning on the British and the French when they were trying to protect their interests in the Canal, it meant that they were finished in other parts of the world as well. That was a very unfortunate thing because it meant that the United States then virtually had to act alone."

Despite the geopolitical consequences of Eisenhower's pressure, history has recorded that Eisenhower had no second thoughts regarding his decision. According to Stephen E. Ambrose, author of an Eisenhower biography, editor of the Eisenhower papers and director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans, the former president "never wavered on or regretted his decision to force the invading parties out of Egypt, no matter what."

Fisher, though, on that October afternoon in Gettysburg, would hear a different story. Evidently, the ensuing decade had provided an opportunity for Eisenhower to reflect. For as Fisher's conversation with him drew to a close, the former president wistfully commented: "You know, Max, looking back at Suez, I regret what I did. I never should have pressured Israel to evacuate the Sinai."

Fisher was astonished by the statement, but apparently he was not the only one to whom Eisenhower had divulged this information.

"Eisenhower," says Nixon, "many years later, in the 1960s, told me — and I'm sure he told others — that he thought that the action that was taken [at Suez] was one he regretted. He thought it was a mistake."

Fisher started to say goodbye to Eisenhower; it was then, almost as an afterthought, that Eisenhower revealed another startling facet of his reconsideration. Although the former president did not live long enough to witness the results — in doing so he clarified the course of Fisher's political career.

"Max," Eisenhower said, "if I'd had a Jewish adviser working for me, I doubt I would have handled the situation the same way. I would not have forced the Israelis back."

Eisenhower's statement struck Fisher with the impact of epiphany. If Fisher had been unsure of the extent of power that an unofficial adviser could wield with a president, he now had his answer, and from an unimpeachable source: the influence exerted could be decisive. It was exactly the role Fisher hoped to play. Fisher thanked Eisenhower for his time and the former president again promised to try to be there for the UJA dinner.

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On December 11, 1965, the United Jewish Appeal gathered for its Annual Conference at the Hilton Hotel in New York City. It was there, in the Grand Ballroom, that the medal was presented. Fisher spoke of the three honorees: General Pierre Koenig, leader of the French Resistance; Field Marshall Alexander of Great Britain, who evacuated British troops from Dunkirk and later fought the Nazis in North Africa; and Eisenhower. In a voice edged with emotion, Fisher repeated what General Eisenhower had said two decades ago while paying a Yom Kippur visit to the Jewish displaced persons camp in Feldafing, Germany:

"I feel especially happy," Fisher quoted, "'to be in a Jewish camp on the holiest day of your year. You are only here temporarily, and you must be patient until . . . you will leave here and go to the places you wish to go. I know how much you have suffered and I believe a sunnier day will be coming soon.'"

Sadly, Eisenhower was not at the Hilton to receive his medal: General Lucius D. Clay, Eisenhower's erstwhile dep-

uty commander in Europe, was standing in for his friend, who had suffered another heart attack and was in the hospital.

Fisher, saddened that Eisenhower was not there on that evening, was grateful for the political gift that he had given him. Let Nixon then, the first president to allow Fisher to exercise his influence in Washington, define the position to which Fisher aspired.

"There is no question about it," says Nixon. "A private citizen who has no selfish interest, who, like Max, is not in business for himself, who is a supporter of the administration, can have a substantial influence on a close decision. He can't create policy, but when it is a very close call, as it was at Suez, someone like Max can change the president's mind."

Now, all Fisher had to do was choose the right man in 1968. Romney was emerging as a favorite in the polls. But two other hopefuls were courting him — Nixon and Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York. Picking the winner, Fisher soon learned, would prove a far harder task than it originally seemed.