

**AGAINST THE EXPERTS:
HARRY S. TRUMAN, DAVID K. NILES,
AND THE BIRTH OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL, 1945-1948**

by

David A Friedman

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in History**

Whitman College 2011

In Memory of Joyce Shane, 1941-2010

To My Parents

Notwithstanding my desire and delight to be the disciple of the earlier authorities and to maintain their views and to assert them, I do not consider myself a donkey carrying books. I will explain their ways and appreciate their value, but when their views are inconceivable to my thoughts, I will plead in all modesty, but will judge according to the sight of my own eyes. And when the meaning is clear I shall flatter none, for the Lord gives wisdom in all times and in all ages.

Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
I. The Bewildering Blueprint: Zionism, FDR, and the Postwar Middle East	15
II. Truman Under Pressure: The Crisis of the Jewish Refugees	30
III. Truman vs. the Wise Men: The UN Partition Resolution	58
IV. Against the Experts: Truman's Recognition of Israel	83
Abbreviations	113
Bibliography	114

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to the research and writing of this thesis and to each of them I owe my heartfelt thanks. The History Department funded my trip to the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri. The archivists at the Truman Library helped me to navigate the archives and concentrate my research. Of all the warm, friendly, and knowledgeable staff there, I am especially indebted to Randy Sowell, who helped organize my visit and was kind enough to send me documents by mail that I had overlooked. I would also like to thank the staff at Penrose Library, who helped me to locate key sources and were tolerant of the mountain of books I kept stacked on the third floor. Their jokes that I “sleep in the library” put a smile on my face on the longest, hardest days.

I am grateful to Professor David Schmitz for his teaching, editing, and inspiration in my thesis and throughout my four years at Whitman. He supported me when I was struggling to find a topic and encouraged me to pursue something that I was passionate about. His editing challenged me to focus my argument and significantly improved my analysis. The skills he taught me as a research assistant were invaluable in my work at Truman Library. Most importantly, his support and encouragement kept me enthusiastic throughout this undertaking.

I am greatly indebted to Professor Schmitz for helping me to discover my love for history and for academia. He is a model of brilliant teaching and support for his students. He spent countless hours assisting me with my Vietnam, Iraq, and Historical Methodologies papers, hired me to do summer research, and helped to facilitate other opportunities and scholarships outside Whitman. Schmitz’s teaching is what made me decide to become a history major. He is largely responsible for making my college studies as challenging and rewarding as they have been.

My thesis is dedicated to my parents, Kaila and Jaime. It would be impossible for words to do justice to the debt of gratitude I owe these two extraordinary individuals. My Mom traveled with me to Independence as my “research assistant” and without her dedicated efforts on the copy machine, I never would have been able to do so much in so little time. I fed off of her unanticipated energy and excitement with Truman and Israel.

Our conversations over dinners in Kansas City allowed me to articulate and wrestle with my argument for the first time.

My Dad is my most faithful editor. He read every word of this thesis and as always made my words and ideas more concise and eloquent. It is to my Dad that I owe the genesis of my topic as well. When I told him I was interested in Truman, he called me a few days later with the name David Niles, a little known or appreciated Jewish advisor to the president. The rest is history, so to speak.

My parents are my most consistent, driving inspirations who fostered in me a love of life and learning. I am grateful to them for instilling in me a passionate interest in the Jewish people, which is the deepest source of inspiration for my thesis. My parents are both quintessential *mensch*s who taught me to always do right, even against the experts. My Mom's independence and courage are guiding forces in my life. My Dad's passion, knowledge, and character are the same. I will always be humbled by their example.

INTRODUCTION

No problem I faced while I was president of the United States was more controversial and more complex than the problem of Israel...that's when I began to feel that the presidential chair was the loneliest place that a man could be. If you think that the president has somebody to pass the buck to, you're just as mistaken as you can be. I had a sign on my desk – "the buck stops here" – it couldn't get any further.¹

-Harry S. Truman

When the sudden death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt catapulted Harry S. Truman into the presidency on April 12, 1945, the new chief executive faced an overwhelming array of challenges in American foreign policy. Yet, according to President Truman, none of these were as controversial and complex as the problem of Israel.² There was something especially challenging about the debate over American support for a Jewish state in Palestine. In no other matter in foreign affairs was the Truman administration as sharply divided or were Truman's decisions at such odds with the advice of his senior foreign policy advisors.

Between 1945 and 1948 Truman was caught in a whirlwind of conflicting interests of the State Department, American Zionists and the White House. Truman was deluged with compelling arguments from all sides – from State Department officials opposed to complicating relations with Arab governments in the Middle East to Zionists convinced of the necessity of a Jewish state.

Though well-supplied with foreign policy specialists, Truman was fiercely independent and determined to be self-reliant in foreign policy. "Always do right," read a

¹ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman*, Videocassette, Episode 6: "At War with the Experts," 1964, Motion Picture Archives, HSTL.

² *Ibid.*

quote on the president's desk, "this will gratify some people and astonish the rest."³ Yet, turmoil in the administration and in public opinion over Palestine threatened Truman's independent-mindedness and his control of foreign policy.

How did Truman weather the bewildering set of conflicts that surrounded American policy in Palestine? What led Truman to support American recognition of the State of Israel, ten minutes after it was founded on May 14, 1948? Under conflicting pressures, Truman took refuge in the private counsel of less prominent men whose wisdom and discretion he trusted. One such man was Special Assistant for Minority Affairs David K. Niles, whose power was wielded almost entirely behind the scenes. Between 1945 and 1948, David Niles played a decisive role in shaping American policy in the Middle East. He persuaded the president to reject the advice of the majority of his senior foreign policymakers and to support instead the establishment and recognition of a Jewish state in Palestine.

The study of David Niles is key to understanding Truman's overall conduct of foreign policy. It sheds light on the complex patchwork of the legacy of an inexperienced president who nevertheless possessed strong independent convictions and who, despite all the advice against it, came to support a Jewish state in Palestine. A testament to his independence, Truman, when faced with diametrically opposed opinions from State Department officials and American Zionists, accepted the policy recommendations of Niles, an advisor with little political clout and expertise in preference to the views of the most revered Middle East experts in the administration. The advice of this quiet, Jewish, mid-level bureaucrat, led Truman to fundamentally alter the landscape of American foreign policy by formally recognizing a Jewish state in the Middle East.

³ Ibid.

A Tenacious Debate: Historiography of Harry Truman and Palestine

Since 1948, President Truman's support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine has fascinated a myriad of historians. No single interpretation has emerged to explain the events surrounding the president's decision to recognize Israel on May 14, 1948. Truman has been seen as an ardent Zionist determined to secure a Jewish state from his inauguration, a shrewd politician with his eyes on the Jewish vote, and the subject of the persuasive lobbying of a determined segment of advisors within his administration. These interpretations outline three schools of thought – Zionist, public opinion, and private pressure – that have shaped the historical literature on American involvement in Palestine between 1945 and 1948.

The first studies of Truman and Israel emerged directly on the heels of American recognition. The outlines of the Zionist school emerged in 1949 with Frank Edward Manuel's *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations*. Admiring Truman's decision to support a Jewish state in Palestine, Manuel argued that the president found himself in the fortunate position of being able to serve his personal beliefs about Jewish suffering and do the "right thing" in Palestine.⁴ The president had great sympathy for Jewish refugees and for a Zionist solution to their problems. Indeed, "if [Truman] could help displaced persons in Europe and secure the existence of those Jews who were already in Palestine, he would intervene on their behalf."⁵ Cold War considerations stalled Truman's own wishes temporarily and strengthened the pro-Arab line of his diplomats, but these countervailing forces were never enough to derail the president's commitment to humanitarian goals. This interpretation of Truman's policymaking, that the president

⁴ Frank Edward Manuel, *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Pres, 1949), 319.

⁵ Ibid.

was possessed of straightforward and unwavering Zionist convictions “from the very beginning” had an enormous impact on subsequent scholarship.⁶

Revisions of the dominant assumption that Truman had entered the White House manifestly sympathetic to Zionist goals in Palestine emerged in the 1960s. In *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, Joseph Schechtman argued that Truman did not begin his presidency as a Zionist. Schechtman argued that the chief executive initially called for the settlement of 100,000 Jews in Palestine while refusing to make any commitment to the permanent political status of the area. Schechtman saw the Truman administration as eventually accepting the wisdom of a Zionist approach, not as destined and determined to support the creation of a Jewish state.⁷

New interpretations of the American role in the creation of Israel surfaced in the 1970s. Historians of public opinion came forward to consider how domestic political considerations conditioned Truman’s decision-making regarding Israel. Responding to admirers of Truman who praised the chief executive for his commitment to the establishment of Israel on humanitarian grounds, the public opinion school contended that Truman had made his decision solely on the calculation that recognizing Israel would win him the Jewish vote in the upcoming election. In *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and Israel*, John Snetsinger argued that Truman was a shrewd politician whose Palestine policy represented the “politically expedient course designed to win the favor of the American Jewish community.” Snetsinger stressed that “much of the adulation [of Truman’s contribution] has been misplaced.” Truman was neither the committed Zionist nor humanitarian that admirers of the president had claimed. Indeed, Truman had “no

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joseph B Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement: The Crucial Debate, 1939-1949* (New York: Herzl Press, 1966).

commitment to the Zionist program” and supported a Jewish state in Palestine for the sake of political exigencies alone. As Snetsinger argued, “Truman’s Palestine-Israel policy offers an extraordinary example of foreign policy conducted in line with short range political expediency rather than long range national goals.”⁸

Snetsinger’s interpretation became a standard for scholarship over the next decade. In *Truman’s Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman*, Harold Gosnell echoed Snetsinger’s analysis. *Truman’s Crises* maintained that the president’s “decision to support Jewish immigration to Palestine was based on political...reasons.”⁹ For Gosnell, “the main factor was, of course, that [Truman] was in the middle of a fight for his political life and the Jewish vote...exercised disproportionate weight in the presidential electoral college.”¹⁰

In the late 1970s, Zvi Ganin’s *Truman, American Jewry, and Israel, 1945-1948* offered a compromise approach to the debate on the role of domestic political considerations in Truman’s foreign policymaking. Like Snetsinger, Ganin dealt with the interplay of American Jewish leaders and President Truman over the question of Palestine. In Ganin’s view, however, the Jewish lobby was not as potent as Snetsinger had posited. American Jews as a whole were hardly a harmonious group but were beset by deep internal divisions which hindered their ability to present a united front, Ganin argued. Although many American Jews rallied to the Zionist cause and pressured Truman to come out in favor of a Jewish Palestine, others, including the prominent American Council for Judaism were hostile to the idea of Jewish self-determination.

⁸ John Snetsinger, *Truman, The Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), 140.

⁹ Harold F Gosnell, *Truman’s Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 361.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

According to Ganin, Truman's recognition of Israel was less a response to Zionist pressure and his need for the Jewish vote than a positive response to the persuasive lobbying of his staff members and the realities of the Palestine situation itself.

Ganin's recognition of the influence of Truman's advisors foreshadowed arguments made by the private pressure school that emerged in the 1980s that emphasized the influence of members of the foreign policy establishment aside from the president on Truman's policy in Palestine. First among historians of this persuasion was Dan Tschirigi, author of *Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement with the Palestine Problem*. Tschirigi claimed that presidential assistants "Samuel Rosenman, David Niles, and Clark Clifford were prominent spokesmen for the idea that the Democratic Party as well as the president would suffer from a policy opposed by Zionist sentiment."¹¹ These advisors were "the most consistent and strong supporters of the Zionist cause within the upper levels of policy making."¹² According to Tschirigi, the strength of the Jewish voting contingent, the ability of Zionists to successfully lobby congressmen and the White House and the influence of Truman's staff members overwhelmed the State Department's pro-Arab policy in the Middle East and led Truman to support a Jewish state in Palestine.

In the 1990s, Michael Cohen's *Truman and Israel* built on Tschirigi's model, exploring the impact of Truman's aides in the development of his approach to a Jewish state. According to Cohen, Truman's personal associations, including lifelong Jewish friendships worked in favor of the recognition of Israel. Cohen rejected the public opinion school, insisting that domestic political considerations were not the decisive

¹¹ Dan Tschirigi, *Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement with the Palestine Problem* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 259.

¹² Ibid.

factor in Truman's thinking. Cohen argued that political dividends alone could not have persuaded the president to adopt a policy counter to national interests, as Snetsinger and others had argued. Instead, it was private pressure within the administration that persuaded the president, "against the advice of all the official 'experts' to lend his diplomatic support to the Zionist cause when it was needed most."¹³ Cohen showed how presidential advisors, especially Max Lowenthal "drafted Truman's Palestine policy at the White House" and persuaded Truman that American support would prevent the Jewish state from leaning toward the Soviets.¹⁴

Twenty-first century scholarship on Truman and Israel has offered new mixtures of older interpretations. In *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*, Douglas Little integrated competing interpretations into a composite picture of Truman's policy in Palestine. As in the early Zionist accounts, Little characterized Truman as a "lifelong friend of the underdog who instinctively placed greater weight"¹⁵ on Zionists concerns than his predecessors. Truman's sympathies, however, were not the only factor in the decision to recognize Israel. In a nod to the by-now widely accepted body of scholarship on public opinion, Little acknowledged that election year politics also played a role. Truman was "far too shrewd a politician not to realize that his recognition of Israel in the spring would reap handsome dividends from American Jews before the year was out."¹⁶ These were not path-breaking insights. Little did place more weight on Cold War concerns than previous historians, however. In his view, Truman was "deeply concerned about the possible Soviet inroads into the Middle East" and

¹³ Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁵ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

“regarded a Jewish state as a stronger bulwark against communism than anything the Arabs could muster.”¹⁷

The most recent scholarship has continued the trend of amalgamating prior interpretations. In his *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present*, Michael Oren picked up the revisionist approach to the early Zionist school, claiming that Truman was not an unwavering Zionist. Truman demonstrated much “ambivalence toward Jews and Zionism” and preferred for a long time to make the world safe for Jews, but not necessarily resettle them in Palestine.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Oren’s focus on Truman’s humanitarianism harked back to early Zionist scholarship. According to Oren, the plight of Jewish refugees “increasingly seized public opinion in the United States and nightly haunted the president.”¹⁹ In response, Truman consistently rose above partisan crosscurrents in the administration to formulate his Palestine policy in line with his conception of a just response to Jewish suffering. The schools of public opinion and private pressure also influenced Oren’s work. Oren saw presidential advisors as “urg[ing] Truman to adopt pro-Zionist views, on both political and ethical grounds.”²⁰

A “Passion for Anonymity:” David Niles in the Historical Literature

Despite the depth of historical scholarship on Truman’s Middle East policy, the president’s relationship with David Niles has received little scholarly attention. David Niles’ influence on the Palestine question was virtually unknown to the public in the 1940s and has largely escaped the attention of historians.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 484.

¹⁹ Ibid., 483.

²⁰ Ibid., 489.

Niles was an enigma even to colleagues and close friends. Bookish and determinedly private, the special assistant refused to make public appearances and was uncomfortable finding his name in print.²¹ George Elsey, a White House assistant, referred to Niles as a “most secretive individual who slunk rather furtively round the corridors of the White House,” never sharing the details of his private meetings with the president.²² White House Counsel Clark Clifford, who worked closely with Niles, recalled that “with outsiders, [Niles] cultivated an air of mystery, and insiders said that his enigmatic style either masked real power or created a useful illusion of power.”²³ Speaking to a reporter in 1949, Roger N. Baldwin, director of the American Civil Liberties Union, reflected that “I have known [David Niles] for thirty years and I would like to find out something about him.”²⁴

Yet Niles’ low profile did not reflect the magnitude of his authority with the president on matters regarding Palestine. Both admirers and adversaries of Niles recognized his devoted and enduring efforts as a Middle East advisor. In a grateful tribute to Niles, Chaim Weizmann, the first president of the State of Israel, wrote: “Need I tell you of my profound appreciation? For many years now you have played no insignificant part in the making of this history...[by] bring[ing] about a proper understanding of the ideals of our cause in high places in Washington.”²⁵ In March 1951, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett credited Niles with “inestimable assistance during

²¹ David B. Sachar, “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine: A Case Study in American Foreign Policy,” Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Harvard University, 1959, 3.

²² Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 77.

²³ Clark M. Clifford and Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 7.

²⁴ Alfred Steinberg, “Mr. Truman’s Mystery Man,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 24, 1949, 24.

²⁵ Weizmann to Niles, February 20, 1949, David K. Niles Papers, General File, Box 35, HSTL.

all these momentous years – an assistance outstanding alike in its far-reaching effectiveness and in its nobly self-effacing character.”²⁶

Officials with whom Niles came into conflict recognized that he was the key man in the achievement of independence for the State of Israel. In January 1948, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal noted in his diary that the forces opposed to American recognition of Israel were often “seriously embarrassed and handicapped by the activities of Niles at the White House in going directly to the President on matters involving Palestine.”²⁷ Loy Henderson, director of the Near East Affairs division of the State Department, regarded Niles as “the most powerful and diligent advocate of the Zionist cause” for Truman.²⁸

Given his evident influence, it is surprising that in the scholarly literature on Truman and Palestine, Niles has largely escaped the eyes of historians. The Zionist school saw President Truman as so intrinsically sympathetic to the idea of a Jewish state that the influence of pro-Zionists in his administration would have been nominal at best. The private pressure school, though keenly focused on the role of mid-level bureaucrats in the Truman administration, tended to view Niles as less significant than other advisors. Finally, public opinion school historians were either unaware of Niles’ influence, or dismissed him as merely a consultant on matters concerning the president’s re-election.

The earliest historical assessment of Niles emerged in the 1950s. David Sachar’s “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine: A Case Study in American Foreign Policy,” an unpublished undergraduate honors thesis written at Harvard in 1959, is the only available study on the special assistant. Sachar argued that Niles played a

²⁶ Sachar, “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine,” 2.

²⁷ Walter Millis, Ed., *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), 360-361.

²⁸ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 77.

significant behind-the-scenes role in obtaining American support for Zionist ambitions in Palestine. He claimed, “no one in the White House, with the exception of President Truman, was more instrumental than Niles in shaping and influencing Administration policy toward the newly-developing state.”²⁹ Though Sachar’s research illuminated many aspects of Niles’ work, it was limited by the amount of declassified sources available in the 1950s. Five decades after Sachar’s study, a vastly richer archival record exists to ascertain Niles’ crucial role and place his advice in the wider context of Truman’s conduct of foreign policy.

Efforts by historians to build upon Sachar’s research have been minimal and analyses of Niles’ role have remained sparse and insufficient. Michael Cohen devoted some attention to David Niles in *Truman and Israel*. While scholars before him had surveyed the impact of senior-level officials such as White House Counsel Clark Clifford, Cohen was the first to devote a great deal of energy to mid-level bureaucrats in the Truman administration. He explored the roles of David Niles and Max Lowenthal, “the two key advisors working on the Zionists’ behalf inside the White House.” Both, he claimed, “were quintessential back-room boys” who had a major influence on Truman’s Palestine policy after World War II.³⁰ Lowenthal, however, received the lion’s share of Cohen’s analysis. In *Truman and Israel*, Lowenthal’s private diary was used for the first time, bringing to light a level of influence that had hitherto gone unnoticed. In view of this, Cohen narrowed his focus to Max Lowenthal at the expense of David Niles.

Other historians acknowledged David Niles’ contribution but left his impact unexplored. In *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, Howard

²⁹ Sachar, “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine,” 3.

³⁰ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 75.

Sachar clearly saw Niles as having a critical impact on Truman's policymaking. Sachar claimed, "one of those who functioned most effectively behind the scenes was David K. Niles, Truman's special assistant for minority affairs." Sachar asserted that Niles was the man through whom "the sense and fervor of American Zionism were transmitted to the president."³¹ He also credited Niles with "persuad[ing] Truman in July 1947 to drop the State Department officials George Wadsworth and Loy Henderson as advisors to the American delegation at the UN General Assembly, and to replace them with Major General John H. Hilldring, whose sympathetic treatment of displaced persons during his tenure with the American military government in Germany had favorably impressed the Zionists."³² Sachar's arguments, however, were not buttressed by any in-depth analysis of the role Niles played during this period.

Another factor contributing to Niles' absence from the literature has been the tendency among historians to view Niles as more of a political consultant to the president than a Zionist advocate. Cohen summarized Niles' role as "advis[ing] the president which Jewish leaders to receive and which might be rejected politely without causing too much political damage."³³ According to Cohen, Niles saw himself "not as a representative of the Jews to the White House but rather as a protector of the president from the divergent pressure groups."³⁴

Under the influence of the public opinion school, Cohen and other historians claimed that Niles was more of a protector of domestic political considerations for Truman than he was possessed of any firm Zionist aspirations of his own. Douglas Little

³¹ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel, A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 3rd Ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 290.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 76.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

claimed that “Foggy Bottom’s Loy Henderson, who had warned the White House repeatedly that recognizing Israel would harm U.S. interests, could still remember David Niles replying sharply, ‘Look here, Loy, the most important thing for the United States is for the President to be reelected.’”³⁵ Because Niles was viewed primarily as a guardian of electoral self-interest for the president, the impact of Niles’ support for Zionism on Truman has been largely ignored.

The following study fills a critical gap in the literature by showing that David Niles played an instrumental role in shaping American policy in the Middle East, persuading the president to support a Jewish state in Palestine against the advice of the majority of the Truman administration’s senior foreign policymakers. This comes five decades after David Sachar’s undergraduate paper, during which time no other study has emerged specific to the Truman-Niles partnership. Because a plethora of government documents and memoirs have been made accessible to historians since the 1950s, Niles’ role in American recognition of Israel warrants a thorough reevaluation.

New research on David Niles shows that as Truman sought a buffer against the intense conflicting pressures of the Palestine question, Niles became Truman’s most important private counselor, a less prominent advisor whose wisdom and discretion the president trusted and relied upon. The Truman-Niles partnership became one of the most important, perhaps the single most important, factor in securing American recognition of Israel in May 1948.

Reexamining Truman’s Middle East policy also challenges the notion that American support for Zionism was undertaken only on account of domestic political considerations. In many cases, David Niles elevated the Zionist cause above pure

³⁵ Little, *American Orientalism*, 87.

electoral politics and persuaded the president that support for a Jewish state was consistent with American national interests. Niles was a Democrat and would have liked to see Truman serve another term, but as a Jew and a friend of the Zionist cause, the political dividends of recognizing Israel were in perfect harmony with what he considered a just and proper solution to the Palestine problem.

Finally, revisiting the influence of David Niles permits us to explore in greater depth the debate surrounding the establishment of Israel and Truman's momentous decision to recognize the new nation. Because of Niles, President Truman decided - against the experts - to fundamentally alter the landscape of American foreign policy and support a Jewish state in Palestine.

In the following study, Chapter One examines the genesis of Niles' special relationship with Truman as the new president came to terms with the inconsistent and directionless Middle East policy of his predecessor and worked to clarify the American approach to Palestine. Chapter Two traces Niles' impact during the Jewish refugee crisis, in which Truman fought to reconcile his humanitarian aspirations for Jewish immigration to Palestine with the vehement opposition of Middle East experts in the administration. Chapter Three explains how the partition plan for Palestine became a question for the United Nations and how Niles convinced Truman to support a UN resolution for the establishment of a Jewish state. Finally, Chapter Four considers Niles' role both in interrupting the State Department's campaign to reverse American support for partition and in making the case for American recognition of Israel in 1948.

I. THE BEWILDERING BLUEPRINT: ZIONISM, FDR, AND THE POSTWAR MIDDLE EAST

I feel like I have been struck by a bolt of lightning.¹

-Harry S. Truman, April 12, 1945

When Truman became president in April 1945, he inherited an ambiguous and inconsistent Middle East policy from his predecessor. Among numerous international challenges, Truman faced a bafflingly complex and controversial situation in Palestine. His inexperience in foreign affairs in 1945 added to the difficulty of clarifying American policy toward the establishment of a Jewish state in British-controlled Palestine. With no clear blueprint in place for the postwar Middle East and conflicting pressures mounting from Zionists and the State Department, Truman relied on David Niles to communicate the position of American Zionist groups fighting for an independent Jewish state.

The Jewish Yearning for Sovereignty: A Zionist Prelude

Since the turn of the century, the Zionist movement had actively pursued the establishment of a sovereign home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Jewish immigration to Palestine started in earnest in 1882 and continued steadily in the pre-World War I period. As the Great War advanced and the Zionist movement emerged as a “political force capable of aiding vital British interests,”² Britain issued the Balfour Declaration of 1917, recognizing the “historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine” and agreeing to assist in the realization of a Jewish state. The League of

¹ Quoted in Gosnell, *Truman's Crises*, 236.

² Zvi Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, xi.

Nations' Mandate at the end of World War I entrusted the British with the task of establishing in Palestine "a national home for the Jewish people."³

Arab governments in the Middle East responded with hostility to these indications of a British alliance with Zionism. Arab leaders sent delegations to London to protest the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations' Mandate. Violent resistance to Jewish immigration broke out in Palestine in the 1920s and culminated in the Arab Revolt of 1936-1938. Alarmed by the deteriorating situation in the Holy Land, the British issued the 1939 White Paper that sought to restrict the pressure for a Jewish national home by limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. The White Paper had tragic consequences for European Jews, most of whom were unable to escape the rise of Nazism and Hitler's Holocaust.

The Roosevelt Legacy: American Foreign Policy in Palestine to 1945

During World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt watched Palestine with close attention. Though Roosevelt expressed some sympathy with Zionist aspirations in Palestine, it was the official policy of his administration not to disturb British authority in the region by any pro-Zionist declarations. Moreover, "the good will of the Arabs" was seen as "vital for the war effort," as Nazi Germany pushed eastward across Russia and North Africa toward the Middle East in the early 1940s.⁴ In a letter to American Zionist leader Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, Roosevelt argued that "the British must of necessity have the support" of the Arabs "so as to maintain a maximum number of

³ Quoted in Ibid.

⁴ Quoted in Ibid., 7.

fighting men in the Near East and to enlist the support of the peoples who live in that area.”⁵

Furthermore, the advice of the Near East Affairs Bureau of the State Department (NEA) was highly unfavorable to the political aims of the Zionist movement. State Department officials viewed “the Zionist political aspirations as inimical to American national interests.” Seeing the Middle East as an area primarily of British concern, Roosevelt’s advisors argued that British hegemony and policies deserved “maximum American support and backing.” The *Yishuv*, or community of Jewish residents in the Holy Land who opposed the White Paper and aspired for sovereignty, was therefore regarded as “a disturbing element both in the Middle East and to Anglo-American relations.”⁶

The views of the State Department became guiding principles for Roosevelt’s foreign policy in Palestine. In the spring, 1943, King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia warned the United States against the adoption of a pro-Zionist policy and asked for assurances “that Washington would take no action concerning Palestine without informing him in advance.” Bowing to the State Department’s reluctance to antagonize the Arabs, Roosevelt promised King Saud that “no decision altering the basic situation of Palestine should be reached without fully consulting with both Jews and Arabs.”⁷

The growing impact of the Holocaust and the increasing strength and militancy of American Zionist groups, mostly notably the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC) under Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, made Roosevelt’s

⁵ Quoted in Samuel Halperin and Irvin Order, “The United States in Search of a Policy: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Palestine,” *The Review of Politics* 24 (July 1962), 322.

⁶ Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 7.

⁷ Quoted in Halperin and Order, “The United States in Search of a Policy,” 323.

position of neutrality more difficult to sustain. In October 1943, Representative Samuel Weiss of Pennsylvania wrote to Roosevelt requesting him to “intercede with the British for the abrogation of the White Paper.”⁸ Early in 1944, resolutions in support of Jewish aspirations in Palestine were introduced in both houses of Congress: the Wagner-Taft resolution in the Senate and the Wright-Compton resolution in the House of Representatives. Timed to coincide with the approaching deadline set by the British White Paper for the termination of Jewish immigration into Palestine, they were intended to break the official silence in Washington on the Palestine problem and place the future of Palestine on the national agenda of the American people.

The State Department, and especially Secretary of State R. Edward Stettinius, were anxious to neutralize the effect in the Arab world of the pro-Zionist resolutions pending in Congress and argued to the president that their passage would “precipitate conflict in Palestine and other parts of the Arab world, endanger American troops and [require] the diversion of forces from European and other combat zones.”⁹ State Department spokespeople encouraged the president to use his “personal influence [if] necessary to block the resolutions.”¹⁰ Fortunately for Roosevelt, the lobbying of the State and War Departments prevented action in both houses without his direct involvement. Forestalling the congressional resolutions was not enough to the silence Arab indignation, however. In 1944, Roosevelt received a barrage of protests from seven uneasy Arab governments and responded with hasty personal assurances that, as he had

⁸ Ibid., 327.

⁹ Quoted in Ibid., 331.

¹⁰ Ibid.

promised Ibn Saud in 1943, “no decision altering the basic situation of Palestine should be reached without full consultations with both Arabs and Jews.”¹¹

In the last year of his life, President Roosevelt continued to vacillate between placating Arab concerns and making private and public declarations of sympathy to American Zionists. Campaigning for a fourth term in October 1944, Roosevelt authorized a pro-Zionist statement drafted by Rabbi Wise to be made public. It read, “I know how long and ardently the Jewish people have worked and prayed for the establishment of Palestine as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth. I am convinced that the American people give their support to this aim; and if I am re-elected I shall help to bring about its realization.”¹²

Yet Roosevelt was making similarly earnest promises to the Arabs, reinforcing State Department policy that aimed to avoid any change of British White Paper policy “in the fear that such a change might jeopardize the conduct of war and American interests in the Near East.”¹³ At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, during their meeting aboard the U.S.S. *Quincy*, Roosevelt assured King Ibn Saud, “that he would do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs and would make no move hostile to the Arab people.”¹⁴ In attempting to assuage both Jews and Arabs by firmly committing to neither, Roosevelt alienated both groups and heard Jewish and Arab protests right up until the day of his death.

¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 332.

¹³ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 15.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, xi.

The “\$64 Dollar Question:” Truman and Palestine, April-July 1945

When Harry S. Truman was suddenly thrust into the presidency, he inherited the oscillatory and inconsistent Palestine policy of his predecessor. Roosevelt had publicly committed himself to aid the Zionists in the creation of a Jewish state while privately he had agreed “again and again with the officials of the State Department that the proposal for a Jewish state was unfeasible and, in addition, contrary to American interests, which required the friendship and cooperation of the Arab world.”¹⁵ In this context, the drive to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine caught the new, inexperienced, and under-prepared president in what seemed a bewildering crossfire of opinions and interests.

Though Harry Truman was a veteran lawmaker and politician, he had little experience in foreign affairs. Truman never sat on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and his only travel abroad had been to France as an artillery officer in World War I.¹⁶ Ill-prepared for the complexity of foreign policy matters that confronted him as president, Truman struggled to assume control over the direction of American Middle East policy.

Truman was initially stunned by the enormity of the task that opened up before him after the unexpected death of Roosevelt. “I feel like I have been struck by a bolt of lightning,”¹⁷ Truman told John Snyder, a close personal friend, on April 12, 1945. Speaking to reporters on April 13, the new president remarked, “Did you ever have a bull or a load of hay fall on you? If you have, you know how I felt last night. I felt as if two

¹⁵ Herbert Parzeh, “President Truman and the Palestine Quandary: His Initial Experience, April-December 1945,” *Jewish Social Studies* 35 (January 1973), 42.

¹⁶ Gosnell, *Truman’s Crises*, 236.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 218.

planets and the whole constellation had fallen on me. I don't know if you boys pray, but if you do, please pray God to help me carry this load."¹⁸

Truman's inexperience did not make the political legacy of Roosevelt an act any easier to follow. Historian Harold Gosnell best captured Truman's struggle with the status of his legendary predecessor in his political biography of the president, *Truman's Crises*: "It was not only the task itself but people's thinking about it which made the transition difficult. Franklin Roosevelt had been in the office longer than any other president, and many people could picture no one else in that office. The public could not adjust itself to the fact that a plain Midwesterner with a flat voice and thick spectacles was sitting at a desk so recently occupied by one of the most charismatic and glamorous leaders in modern times."¹⁹

To make matters worse, Roosevelt had done little to involve his vice president in the making of his foreign policy. He tended to "[operate] in a highly personal style, and he had not bothered to institutionalize many of the functions that were passed on to his successor."²⁰ As Truman complained to former Vice President Henry Wallace, "They didn't tell me anything about what was going on."²¹

Though Truman started at a disadvantage in matters of international diplomacy, he was not incapable or indecisive, as some historians have claimed. Robert J. Donovan in his *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*, suggested that "Truman was too new to the presidency, too inexperienced, too lacking in prestige and

¹⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 217.

command...to make a drastic change in the course of American policy.”²² Despite his obvious weaknesses, Truman was in fact “highly conscious of his inexperience and lack of knowledge of foreign affairs,” and strove to be decisive upon assuming the presidency.²³ To Truman, “the presidency was a place where decisions had to be made,” and he endeavored to be an independent minded chief executive.²⁴ As he once told Merle Miller, “some of the *experts*, the career fellas in the State Department, thought that they ought to make policy but...as long as I was President, I’d see to it that *I* made policy. Their job was to carry it out, and if there were some who didn’t like it, they could resign anytime they felt like it.”²⁵

Though Truman was fiercely independent and determined to lead his administration in foreign policy matters, the drawbacks of his inexperience and under-preparedness made it urgently necessary to surround himself with trusted advisors on whom he could rely “temporarily to bridge the gap between the two administrations.” Considering that the new president immediately found himself immersed in foreign crises, including the question of Palestine, it was “extremely urgent for him to fill his scanty background.”²⁶ Aware of the nebulosity of Roosevelt’s Middle East policy and conscious of his own lack of specialization in the Palestine issue, Truman retained holdovers from the Roosevelt administration as consultants. One such holdover was David K. Niles, Administrative Assistant to President Roosevelt, who handled

²² Robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 36.

²³ Gosnell, *Truman’s Crises*, 241.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Company, 1973), 216.

²⁶ Gosnell, *Truman’s Crises*, 236.

relationships with minority groups, especially with northeast Jewish liberals, many of whom were ardent Zionists.

The “Enigma Wrapped in a Mystery:” Enter David K. Niles

Niles was a little known member of the Roosevelt administration and was not immediately obvious to Truman as necessary for his White House staff. Even after ten years of government service, Niles remained the “most mysterious behind-the-scenes operator in Washington.”²⁷ According to Alfred Steinberg, “even [Niles’] intimates [knew] little of his work or his background.”²⁸ Colleagues described him as an “Enigma Wrapped in a Mystery” and “New England’s Contribution to Anonymity.” Niles was, in large part, personally responsible for his inconspicuous persona. He refused to make public addresses, declined photographs, and avoided interviews.²⁹ He was fond of telling pesky reporters, “I am a man of no importance.”³⁰ Niles rarely socialized in political circles in Washington. He hated cocktail parties and state dinners and did not drink for fear of being indiscreet.³¹

Born to Russian immigrants on November 23, 1888, Niles grew up in the slums of North Boston. Niles’ father was a struggling tailor with little time for his family. In the absence of his father, Niles’ mother “encouraged in young David a burning desire to get somewhere in life.”³² It was from her that he developed a passion for success and an

²⁷ Alfred Steinberg, “Detailed Idea of David K. Niles Story,” Undated, David K. Niles Papers, General File, Box 34, HSTL.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “David K. Niles, 11/23/88-9/28/52,” Undated Biographical Information, David K. Niles Papers, General File, Box 34, HSTL.

³⁰ Alfred Steinberg, “Mr. Truman’s Mystery Man,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 24, 1949, 24.

³¹ Steinberg, “Detailed Idea of David K. Niles Story,” David K. Niles Papers.

³² Steinberg, “Mr. Truman’s Mystery Man,” 69.

inclination to “take the side of the underdog.”³³ Despite the young man’s ambitions, college was out of the question and Niles went to work in a Boston department store after high school. For pleasure, he attended Sunday evening lectures at Ford Hall, where interested citizens could debate issues with some of the most influential figures of the day. Through the forum’s presentations and discussions, Niles developed a keen interest in politics, and took to “hanging around the hall in his off hours.”³⁴ This caught the attention of George W. Coleman, a prominent Boston businessman and well-connected Republican, who ran the Ford Hall Forum. Coleman adopted Niles as his protégé and at the outbreak of World War I, when Coleman became Assistant Director of the Labor Department’s Information Office, he took Niles to Washington as his personal assistant.

When the end of the First World War eliminated Niles’ position in Washington, Coleman sent Niles back to Boston and promoted him to Assistant Director of the Ford Hall Forum. The new position gave Niles “a priceless education in organizational management and in the art of influencing people.”³⁵ In 1924, Progressive Party politicians Bob LaFollette and Burton K. Wheeler asked Niles to participate in their campaign for the presidency and vice presidency. Aware of the Ford Hall Forum and its effective speaking program, the candidates asked Niles to head their speakers’ bureau. Niles accepted and “in a short time was running the whole campaign.”³⁶ Though the campaign ended disastrously, with LaFollette and Wheeler carrying only Wisconsin’s

³³ Steinberg, “Detailed Idea of David K. Niles Story,” David K. Niles Papers.

³⁴ Steinberg, “Mr. Truman’s Mystery Man,” 69.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

thirteen electoral votes, Niles “had learned a great deal about politics” while “attract[ing] virtually no attention to himself.”³⁷

Niles’ political career took off after the 1924 campaign. Through contacts in Boston, he found a job working under Harvard law professor and future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was litigating the famous Sacco-Vanzetti case. Frankfurter, defense counsel for the Italian immigrants accused of murdering two men during an armed robbery in Massachusetts in 1920, enlisted Niles to “co-ordinate the various defense groups – a most difficult job, in view of the many factions primarily interested in using the two men as a symbol for whatever political product they were selling.” In the Sacco-Vanzetti case, Niles accomplished “some of the most skillful behind-scenes wire-pulling of his career” and became an “incurable political manipulator.”³⁸

In 1928, Niles went to New York to direct the National Committee of Independent Voters for Governor Al Smith in his run for president against Herbert Hoover. There Niles came into close contact with Harry Hopkins, who later became one of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s closest advisors and a key architect of the New Deal. When the Works Progress Administration was set up under Hopkins in 1935, he made Niles his assistant on labor issues and brought him to Washington. Hopkins appointed Niles because “he was shrewd, a glutton for work, and did not crave the publicity and honors other Hopkins’ aides demanded.”³⁹ Niles followed Hopkins to the Department of Commerce on his appointment as secretary in 1938 and aided Hopkins’ push for presidential candidacy in 1940, which quickly fell apart due to the death of Hopkins’ wife

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Steinberg, “Detailed Idea of David K. Niles Story,” David K. Niles Papers.

and the candidate's own ill health. In his work for Hopkins, Niles retained his usual subtlety, "operating for months from an office with no name plate on the door until some Republican congressmen inquired as to just who this mysterious figure was with so much patronage in his control."⁴⁰

Considering Hopkins' lost political ambitions, Niles "from that time on shifted the major share of his loyalty to President Roosevelt" and in only a short time became "indispensable to his new chief."⁴¹ In the 1940 campaign, fearful that independent voters would not support him, Roosevelt asked Niles to "drum up independent votes for him."⁴² Niles resigned from his position as Assistant Secretary of Commerce and organized the Norris-LaGuardia Independents for Roosevelt. This further established Niles' influence among Democrats and also "endeared him to the President."⁴³ Shortly after his election, Roosevelt took on Niles as a key assistant and troubleshooter. In 1942, the president promoted Niles to administrative assistant on labor and minority matters. In his campaign for a fourth term in 1944, it was Niles "upon whom the President leaned most heavily"⁴⁴ to work with the Political Action Committee to gather labor votes and to continue to direct independent groups for Roosevelt. In his capacity as a manager of minority issues, Niles became Roosevelt's designated contact with Zionist organizations.

During World War II, Niles served Roosevelt as a liaison to individual Jews and Zionist groups lobbying the president on complicated and emotionally charged issues of rescue, refugees, and Palestine. Niles was put in charge of all the information coming to the White House on Jewish affairs - from visa requests for Jewish families trapped in the

⁴⁰ Steinberg, "Mr. Truman's Mystery Man," 70.

⁴¹ Steinberg, "Detailed Idea of David K. Niles Story," David K. Niles Papers.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Steinberg, "Mr. Truman's Mystery Man," 70.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Holocaust to leaders of Zionist organizations lobbying for a Jewish state in postwar Palestine. Roosevelt counted on Niles “to advise him on which Jewish leaders he had to see and which he could put off without harming his political capital with Jewish constituents.”⁴⁵ In this capacity, Niles sought to protect the president from pressure groups that attempted “deliberately to create some embarrassment.”⁴⁶ Often, political damage came from AZEC under Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver. Niles “disliked heartily Rabbi Silver and greatly resented his attacks”⁴⁷ on the Roosevelt administration. He favored moderate Zionists including Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and members of the Jewish Agency, who took a “more restrained and respectful approach” to lobbying the president.⁴⁸ Niles built a strong relationship with Rabbi Wise, with whom he shared “a strong dedication to the Democratic Party and to President Roosevelt.”⁴⁹ At Niles’ request, Wise became a frequent speaker at the Ford Hall Forum.

Niles was seen as especially valuable to President Roosevelt because of his loyalty. As Niles explained to another Truman aide in May 1945, he envisaged his chief job “not as a representative of the Jews...but rather as a protector of the president from the divergent pressure groups.”⁵⁰ A Jew himself, Niles was undoubtedly friendly to Zionism, especially as a close observer of the horrors of the Holocaust. But in Roosevelt’s eyes, Niles could be trusted to make decisions based on what was in the best interest of the president. Roosevelt could rely on his political advisor to place allegiance

⁴⁵ Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, “Truman, Jews, and Zionists” in Devine, Michael J, Ed., *Harry S. Truman, The State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2009), 102.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁸ The preferences of Roosevelt and Niles for Rabbi Wise were matters of personal preference, not political agenda. The difference between the extreme and moderate Zionists was one of style and behavior, not of desired end result. See Radosh and Radosh, “Truman, Jews, and Zionists.”

⁴⁹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 25.

⁵⁰ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 75-76.

to the president before his own personal convictions. This put Niles in a special position in the White House. Niles himself admitted that in some respect it was “an unfortunate position because he is the person used by administration...to hold...[the Zionists] off.”⁵¹ Yet, Niles was also in a unique position to sway the president. Already a seasoned political advisor, whose loyalty to the president was never in question and whose access to the president was immediate, Niles could influence issues of Palestine and the Jews. He would continue to play this role with Truman.

Despite occupying a key position of influence, Niles kept an extremely low profile in his work for the Roosevelt administration. When Harry Truman became president in April 1945, he was not aware of the extent of Niles’ service to his predecessor. It was because of the intervention of Matthew Connelly, Truman’s appointments secretary, that the president decided to retain Niles for his administration. Connelly told Truman that losing Niles would mean “los[ing] somebody who would be completely loyal to him,”⁵² who had “backed him for the nomination as vice president in 1944” and could be “invaluable working for Truman in the same job he had for FDR, as an advisor on minority groups, focusing mainly on the Jewish community and New York City politics.”⁵³ Niles was, according to Connelly, “a very bright political analyst. He was quiet, he was receptive, he was never out in front.”⁵⁴

Connelly’s suggestion that Truman keep Niles on as an advisor on Jewish affairs fell on receptive ears, as Truman was thrust headlong into the complexities of the Palestine issue, especially the intense lobbying efforts of a multitude of American Zionist

⁵¹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 24.

⁵² Quoted in Radosh and Radosh, “Truman, Jews, and Zionists,” 101.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*

groups, all with their own personalities and agendas. Niles' experience dealing with these groups in a highly individualized fashion made him critical to the new administration. On July 17, 1945, Truman sent a letter to Niles, asking him to stay on as special assistant for minority affairs. "I know that your long record in government will be helpful to me as it was to the late President Roosevelt," Truman wrote. "It will be of great service to have the benefit of your ability and conscientious service, and the experience and information you have acquired during these years will be most valuable."⁵⁵ Niles accepted the president's offer and the two quickly developed a close working relationship. Truman took a liking to the modesty, diligence, and discretion of his new advisor. Niles had Truman's confidence and affection from the beginning.⁵⁶ Over the next three years, Niles' committed efforts played a critical role in Truman's decision-making and the birth of a Jewish state.

⁵⁵ Truman to Niles, July 17, 1945, David K. Niles Papers, General File, Box 34, HSTL.

⁵⁶ Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 406.

II. TRUMAN UNDER PRESSURE: THE CRISIS OF THE JEWISH REFUGEES

It is a very explosive situation we are facing...[but] what I am trying to do is to make the whole world safe for the Jews.¹

-Harry S. Truman

By the time Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency in 1945, the problem of resettling the European Jewish population, uprooted by Hitler's Holocaust, had grown to near crisis proportions. Truman was sympathetic with the Jewish refugees, a sentiment intensified by postwar revelations of the full extent of Nazi atrocities. Yet, if humanitarian considerations pushed him toward Zionism, countervailing concerns about disrupting Middle East stability were raised repeatedly by numerous State Department and other officials. Under increasing pressure from the foreign policy establishment, Truman shelved his commitment to Zionist objectives and narrowed his focus to the admission of 100,000 Jewish displaced persons into Palestine. The Jewish refugee issue marked Truman's first step into the icy waters of the Palestine debate and occasioned the beginnings of his partnership with David Niles.

The Intractable Debate: Truman, Zionists, and the State Department

The end of World War II in Europe occurred less than a month after Truman took office. The American and British armies discovered and photographed the Eastern European extermination camps with their ghastly components of gas chambers, heaps of bodies, and walking skeletons. Truman suffered great consternation as the realities of the Holocaust and the plight of its victims became known. "The fate of the Jewish victims of Hitlerism was a matter of deep personal concern for me," the president reflected in his

¹ Quoted in Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis*, 315.

memoirs. “I have always been disturbed by the tragedy of people who have been made victims of intolerance and fanaticism because of their race, color, or religion. These things should not be possible in a civilized society.”²

Truman’s sympathy for the plight of the survivors of Nazi persecution was a matter of personal connection and moral principle. Asked why “a Midwest Baptist like me should get so emotionally upset over Palestine and the fate of the Jews and their terrible position in the world,” the president answered, “I knew how they felt.”³ Indeed, the Jews in Europe were reminiscent of members of Truman’s own family who had been displaced during the American Civil War. Truman told reporters,

My grandmother and my mother had told me many stories about what happened to the people who lived between Kansas and Missouri, how they were moved off their homes...[so] I had some notion of what these people were going through who had to be moved from one place to another in order to have a home and I was very anxious that they would not and should not have to go through the same sort of difficulties that the families in the war between the states had to go through. It was my attitude that the American government couldn’t stand idly by as the victims of Hitler’s madness were not allowed to build new lives.⁴

Truman’s empathy for the plight of European Jews was buttressed by his personal relationships with Jews that dated back to his boyhood. Truman began a lifelong friendship with Eddie Jacobson when the two served together in an artillery unit during

² Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 132.

³ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

World War I. After the war, the two men established the Truman and Jacobson Haberdashery in Kansas City, Missouri. Truman thought of Jacobson as “one of the finest men I ever had anything to do with,”⁵ an opinion that remained unchanged throughout his life.

Truman’s social and business contacts with Jews in Kansas City, however, “could not [at that time] instill in him any interest in Jewish problems or in Zionism.”⁶ This was only possible once Truman was elected to the Senate in 1934, where he became aware of the rise of the Third Reich and the persecutions of European Jewry. As a senator, Truman, “along with a majority of members of Congress...endorsed the Zionist goal” and declared “he would be willing to aid the Zionist cause.”⁷ Truman believed that the British were obliged to honor the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which pledged to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Truman wrote in his memoirs: “The question of Palestine as a Jewish homeland goes back to the solemn promise that had been made to them by the British in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, a promise which had stirred the hopes and the dreams of these oppressed people. This promise, I felt, should be kept, just as all promises made by responsible, civilized governments should be kept.”⁸

In 1939, Truman involved himself in the efforts in Congress to pressure the British into relaxing the White Paper to allow Jews to escape Europe to Palestine. Senator Truman spoke briefly on the Senate floor against the White Paper policy and in 1941 joined the American Palestine Committee that supported a Jewish political future in the region.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Zvi Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 20.

⁷ Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis*, 312.

⁸ Truman, *Memoirs*, 132.

In 1945, Truman became president just as the enormities of Hitler's atrocities against Jews came into focus in Washington and in the general public. Now in the Oval Office, Truman was determined to do all he could to alleviate the refugees' plight. "Hitler killed six million Jews," Truman said, "it was horrible. I saw it and I dream about it even to this day. And on that account, the Jews needed some place where they could go."⁹ Truman felt it was his personal responsibility to find a way to "take care of those displaced persons. Give them a place to live, something to eat and something to wear....it was up to us to try to get it done."¹⁰

Truman's determination to resolve the crisis of the Jewish displaced persons put him at the center of a heated, longstanding debate between Middle East experts at the State Department and American Zionists over Palestine. The basic roadmap of the State Department position included opposition to mass Jewish immigration and the establishment of a Jewish state based on Arab hostility, Anglo-American relations, and Cold War considerations. Members of the State Department viewed Zionism as a disruptive element in the Middle East that would undermine good relations with Arab states. Arab hostility would endanger American oil interests, particularly the uninterrupted flow of Middle East oil needed for rebuilding Europe. Palestine, they argued, was an area primarily of British concern and Whitehall's influence among the Arabs was a stabilizing influence in the region. Finally, because the U.S. and U.K. were allies in the Cold War, it was vital that British hegemony be upheld as a barrier against Russian expansion. Any antagonism of the Arabs would be manipulated by Moscow to

⁹ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

bring the Middle East into the Soviet camp. The State Department offered variations on these basic themes to President Truman throughout the debate over Palestine.

The Zionist position was diametrically opposed to that of the State Department experts. According to the Zionists, the Jewish state program was in perfect harmony with American national interests. Supporting an independent Jewish state and ending the British Mandate were in line with America's tradition of anticolonialism. Zionist aspirations would not undercut the Anglo-American alliance, in fact, the British had already promised the Jews sovereignty in the Balfour Declaration and in the League of Nations' Mandate. A progressive, democratic Jewish state would not destabilize the Middle East, but rather would be an example to the Arabs to do the same thing for their own countries. In the Cold War, the Jewish state would strengthen the American position in the Near East vis-à-vis the Soviets and provide a stronger bulwark against communism than anything the Arabs were capable of.

President Truman was initially more sympathetic with the Zionists than he was with the State Department. He wrote that upon becoming president he had "familiarized [himself] with the history of the question of a Jewish homeland" and was skeptical about "some of the views and attitudes of the 'striped-pants boys' in the State Department" who "didn't care enough about what happened to the thousands of displaced persons who were involved."¹¹ To the question of settling the Jewish displaced persons, Truman thought that Zionism might be a just and feasible answer. "It was my feeling," he wrote, "that it would be possible for us to watch out for the long-range interests of our country

¹¹ Ibid.

while at the same time helping those unfortunate victims of persecution to find a home.”¹²

Yet knowing himself to be inexperienced in the complexities of foreign policy, Truman was wary of making policy decisions based on his humanitarian instincts alone. He had to consider the warnings of senior level foreign-policy advisors that founding a Jewish state in Palestine would lead to a war between Jews and Arabs that would threaten the stability of the Middle East.

The State Department lost no time in counseling Truman against the establishment of a Jewish state. In the State Department’s first official communication on Palestine, Secretary of State Edward Stettinius wrote to the president on April 18, 1945, warning him that efforts would soon be made by Zionist leaders to obtain “unlimited Jewish immigration into Palestine and the establishment there of a Jewish state.”¹³ Stettinius advised the president not to commit himself publicly on Palestine before being briefed by the State Department and studying the available documents.¹⁴

Two weeks later, Undersecretary of State Joseph C. Grew briefed Truman on President Roosevelt’s conflicting assurances to Arabs and Jews. Grew reminded Truman of Roosevelt’s promise to Saudi King Ibn Saud that “as regards Palestine he would make no move hostile to the Arab people and would not assist the Jews...against the Arabs.” Surely, Grew argued, the Arab governments regarded Roosevelt’s assurances as “definite commitments on our part.” He emphasized the entire Near East’s “hostility to Zionism,”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dennis Merrill, Ed., *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*, Vol. 24, “The United States’ Recognition of Israel,” (University Publications of America, 1998), 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and that prior to his death Roosevelt had told a member of the State Department that a Jewish state in Palestine “could be established and maintained only by military force.”¹⁵

As Truman heard the advice of State Department personnel who, in the president’s words, were “almost without exception unfriendly to the idea of a Jewish state,”¹⁶ he was pressured in the opposite direction by American Zionist delegations and Jewish public opinion. At the end of World War II, Zionist leaders mobilized to deluge the White House and Congress with letters, telegrams, and requests for meetings on Palestine. Truman was “subjected immediately to the full impact of this Zionist appeal.”¹⁷ In mid-April 1945, Truman met with Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and a delegation from AZEC which, by the early 1940s, had become one of the most formidable Jewish advocacy groups in the United States. The president reassured the group of his continued sympathy for the displaced Jews of Europe, but promised nothing beyond “what President Roosevelt’s policy in Palestine had been.”¹⁸

The power of AZEC and other Zionists lobbying the White House was bolstered by American Jewish public opinion, which had been won over to Zionism during World War II. “The revelations of the death camps and the emergent plight of the refugees effectively transformed Zionism into the dominant mood of this strategically minded minority bloc.”¹⁹ Zionist public relations made the opinions of the Jewish population, which numbered five million Americans by 1945, increasingly felt in the executive branch of government.²⁰ In April 1945, David Niles received the results of a poll entitled

¹⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁶ Quoted in Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 289.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 23.

¹⁹ Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 289.

²⁰ Ibid.

“Public Opinion Toward [the] Creation of [a] Jewish State in Palestine,”²¹ which found that sentiment among American Jews ran about three to one in favor of a Jewish state and that “a great majority of those thought the U.S. government should use its influence to establish it.”²²

Truman found himself caught between Middle East experts, most of whom were predicting a hostile Arab reaction to large-scale Jewish immigration to Palestine, and his own deeply felt compassion for the Jewish refugees. Complicating the matter was the increasingly desperate situation of the Jewish displaced persons in Europe. In mid-1945, Truman learned that many Holocaust survivors remained in the death camps in squalid conditions. “For many Jews the situation had not improved since the arrival of U.S. troops. In May and June 1945, 18,000 Jews died of starvation and disease in Bergen-Belsen; at Dachau...sixty to one hundred survivors of the Holocaust were dying each day.”²³

Taking Action on the Refugee Crisis: The Earl G. Harrison Report

Anxious to make progress on the refugee issue, Truman dispatched Earl G. Harrison, his special investigator for displaced persons, to Europe on June 22, 1945 with instructions to assess the problems, needs, and views of the Jewish refugees. Harrison submitted his report to Truman on August 21. Its findings shocked the president.²⁴

Harrison confirmed the desperate circumstances of the refugees: “As matters now stand,” Harrison observed, “we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except

²¹ Hadley Cantril to Niles, “Public Opinion Toward Creation of Jewish State in Palestine,” April 4, 1945, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

²² Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, *A Safe Haven: Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

that we do not exterminate them... Many Jewish displaced persons are living under guard behind barbed-wire fences...[in] some of the most notorious of the concentration camps, amidst crowded, frequently unsanitary and generally grim conditions.” Harrison emphasized that while non-Jewish prisoners were returning to their homes, Jewish refugees refused to be repatriated to countries where their families had been killed and where their neighbors and friends stood by or even participated in the acts of mass murder. “Their desire to leave Germany is an urgent one,” Harrison argued, “They want to be evacuated to Palestine.”²⁵

Truman found the Harrison Report a “moving document” and noted that it “put a sting into my own feelings.”²⁶ On August 31, 1945, in response to Harrison’s findings, Truman sent a letter to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, instructing him to take immediate measures to improve the conditions in the camps. In addition to his instructions to Eisenhower, Truman also instituted diplomatic steps to persuade the British to open Palestine to 100,000 refugees. Truman directed his new Secretary of State Jimmy Byrnes to deliver a letter to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, citing the Harrison report and urging the “quick evacuation of as many as possible of the non-repatriable Jews...to Palestine.”²⁷

Truman’s attempt to ameliorate the plight of the refugees by supporting large-scale Jewish immigration to Palestine was met with vehement opposition from the State Department and the British. The same day Truman sent his letter to Attlee, he received a memo from the chief of the NEA, claiming the administration should not “advocate a policy of mass immigration,” lest it provoke armed resistance by the Arabs and make

²⁵ Harrison to Truman, Undated, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

²⁶ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman.*

²⁷ *FRUS* 1945, VIII: 739.

necessary the use of American security forces.²⁸ The State and War Departments pressed this line of thinking further when, on September 19, they submitted a joint inquiry into the prospect of American military involvement in Middle East peacekeeping. They declared that 400,000 troops would be the “force required to maintain order in Palestine,” and that this would lead to “an indefinite delay in demobilization of U.S. Army forces” and a “decrease in Allied capacity to assist in carrying the burden of occupying Japan and Germany.”²⁹

For Truman, the daunting outlook of the State Department, especially the assertion that the level of Arab military competence was high enough to require the presence of nearly half a million American peacekeepers, was as fearfully compelling as it was frustrating to the president’s commitment to finding an immediate solution to the refugee problem. Meanwhile, the British rejected Truman’s proposal for the entry of the 100,000 refugees into Palestine. Prime Minister Attlee wrote a letter stating that mass Jewish immigration into Palestine would “set aflame the whole Middle East,” and “break [the] solemn pledges” Truman’s predecessor had made to the Arabs government that they would be consulted on the matter.³⁰ Truman’s frustration grew in the wake of Attlee’s perfunctory dismissal and the State Department’s opposition to the admission of the refugees. After reading the prime minister’s response, Truman called David Niles into the Oval Office. “How can we trust the Labor people in London when they do not

²⁸ Ibid., 734-736.

²⁹ Ibid., 742-743.

³⁰ Ibid., 740.

respect their pledges?” Truman asked. “Today they are cheating the Jews, and where is the assurance that they won’t cheat *us* tomorrow?”³¹

The depth of divisions over Jewish immigration policy forced Truman to the conclusion that, for the present, he should shelve his commitment to Zionism as a long-range solution to the Palestine question. He would continue to exert his influence with the British to open Palestine to the Holocaust survivors on humanitarian grounds, but as for the political future of Palestine, that was a task best left for the United Nations.

Truman’s decision was a reaction to the intensity of pressure from Zionists as well as from State Department officials, which was clearly wearing on him. In a tense meeting with Rabbis Silver and Wise on September 29, 1945, Truman lamented that Zionist insistence on a Jewish state and State Department complaints of past commitments to the Arabs prevented the president from “work[ing] in his own way.”³² A Jewish state, Truman told the rabbis, might “cause a Third World War.”³³ All he could do was to continue to seek a prompt increase in Jewish immigration. The political future of Palestine had to be temporarily set aside, Truman said, and the “humanitarian factor placed foremost.”³⁴

In his memoirs, Truman elaborated on the narrowing of his focus to requesting 100,000 immigration certificates for Palestine: “My basic approach,” Truman explained, “was that the long-range fate of Palestine was the kind of problem we had the U.N for. For the immediate future, however, some aid was needed for the Jews in Europe to find a place to live in decency.” The opposition of the State Department and the intransigence

³¹ Eliahu Elath, “Harry S. Truman – The Man and Statesman,” First Annual Harry S. Truman Lecture (May 18, 1977), Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 30.

³² Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 40.

³³ *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁴ “Truman Asked To Aid Jewish Immigration,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 1945, 39.

of the British were undoubtedly influential in the president's decision. "It was my attitude that America could not stand by while the victim's of Hitler's racial madness were denied the opportunities to build new lives. Neither, however, did I want to see a political structure imposed on the Near East that would result in conflict."³⁵

Thus, in late 1945, President Truman was no closer to bringing a proper resolution to the Jewish refugee crisis than he had been upon becoming president. On the contrary, policymaking was bogged down in a debate threatening to embitter Anglo-American relations, alienate American Jewry, destabilize the Middle East, and prolong the suffering of the victims of the world's greatest tragedy. As the intractable question of the Jewish displaced persons underwent further investigation, Truman found invaluable assistance in the counsel of David Niles.

Consensus or Conflict? The Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry

After six months in office, the president remained embattled with Whitehall and the State Department over the Jewish refugee crisis. In a November meeting with his chiefs of mission in the Near East, Truman remarked that "this question had been causing him and [Secretary of State Jimmy] Byrnes more trouble than almost any other question which is facing the United States."³⁶ No consensus could be reached between Washington and London on a proper solution to the plight of the displaced persons. Truman pushed for the immediate release of 100,000 Holocaust survivors to Palestine. The British rejected the notion that Jews had no future in Europe.³⁷ Unable to reach a compromise, the British and American governments agreed to appoint a joint Anglo-

³⁵ Truman, *Memoirs*, 140.

³⁶ *FRUS* 1945, VIII: 17.

³⁷ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 51.

American Committee of Inquiry (AACI) to advise on the question of the Jewish displaced persons.

On November 13, 1945, President Truman announced the establishment of the AACI and charged it with examining the position of the Jews in Europe, evaluating the possibility of Jewish repatriation, and considering appropriate means of ameliorating the refugee crisis.³⁸ The White House then immediately began a search for the American members of the AACI. The process was emblematic of the tense divisions within the administration. The State Department, in an effort to achieve a pro-Arab outcome from the committee's deliberations, pressed for the appointment of anti-Zionists to the AACI, including as committee secretary, the former president of Lebanon's Beirut College. Their candidate was a fervent and outspoken Arabist. According to committee member Frank W. Buxton, "on his first interview with members of the committee, [the State Department applicant's] pro-Arab stand was so manifest that his candidacy had to be quickly eliminated."³⁹

Despite the pressure from Foggy Bottom, Truman aimed at "securing a 'balanced' committee, one that would represent both State Department and Zionist views."⁴⁰ Niles advised the president directly on this matter and pressed for the appointment of Zionist sympathizers to the committee. In this effort, Niles came into direct conflict with NEA director Loy Henderson. When one candidate, former governor of California Oliver Max Gardner withdrew his name from consideration for health reasons, Niles pressed for the appointment of Bartley Crum, a prominent Catholic layman and San Francisco lawyer

³⁸ Merrill, *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*, 11.

³⁹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 58.

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 126.

who had expressed “undisguised Zionist leanings.”⁴¹ Not only was Crum interested in the displaced persons on humanitarian grounds, he was also manifestly sympathetic to the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. “No Christian,” Crum wrote in his account of his AACI tenure, “can in fairness deny...the sympathetic support of [the] humanitarian efforts to make a spiritual and temporal place of refuge for oppressed Jews - a place which they could truly regard as their homeland.”⁴²

Crum was also a close friend of Niles, a man the special assistant trusted personally. When Loy Henderson and the rest of the State Department objected to the appointment on the grounds that Crum was “a radical” and “a member of the Communist Party,”⁴³ Niles passed the State Department materials “directly over to the candidate himself”⁴⁴ so that Crum could refute the accusations. Niles also played a crucial role in Truman’s appointment of James McDonald, formerly League of Nations high commissioner for refugees, another outspoken pro-Zionist.

On December 10, 1945, President Truman announced the composition of the AACI which included Niles’ two close friends in key positions. Supervising them as chairman would be Judge Joseph Hutcheson, a compromise candidate appointed by the president for his balanced approach to the Palestine question. Hutcheson apparently “felt himself a free agent and was approaching the issue in that spirit.”⁴⁵ Bartley Crum described him as “independent” and possessing a “profound desire to find a solution both just and equitable.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bartley C. Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain: A Personal Account of Anglo-American Diplomacy in Palestine and the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), 265-266.

⁴³ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 126.

⁴⁵ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 58.

⁴⁶ Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, 5.

In February 1946, the twelve members of the AACI visited the European displaced person camps. What they found confirmed the findings of the Harrison Report, that the situation of the Jews was desperate and there was among the refugees “an overwhelming and unyielding desire to go to Palestine.”⁴⁷ One poll taken by the AACI of 18,311 displaced persons showed that 13 of them wished to remain in Europe, 586 wished to go someplace other than Palestine, and 17,712 wished to go to Palestine.⁴⁸ Based on the committee’s findings, Bartley Crum insisted that an interim report be submitted to both governments. “The American people,” Crum held, “were entitled to know the facts.”⁴⁹ Defying efforts to keep the committee’s proceedings a secret, Crum took it upon himself to hold a press conference with foreign correspondents in Vienna. “The displaced persons must be permitted to go where they [want] to go” Crum argued, “and if that was Palestine, so be it. If they [do] not get out...they [will] become utterly demoralized.”⁵⁰ As Crum wrote in his account, “I prepared myself to make the strongest possible plea to my colleagues for an Interim Report,”⁵¹ which would have undoubtedly been pro-Zionist.

Crum’s outspokenness alarmed State Department officials in Washington who told President Truman that an interim report would “compromise the impression of judicious impartiality which was so necessary to the operations of the Committee.”⁵² Truman stood with the State Department on the issue. On February 19, Crum received a telephone call from Judge Hutcheson, who, on orders from the White House, asked him

⁴⁷ Sachar, “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine,” 21.

⁴⁸ Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, 85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Sachar, “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine,” 21.

“not to insist upon an Interim Report.”⁵³ Any recommendations, Hutcheson demanded, were to be made “when we filed our final report.”⁵⁴ Crum resented the “deep maneuvering” of State Department anti-Zionists who had intervened at the White House and considered resigning from the AACI.⁵⁵

On February 20, news of Crum’s threats to resign reached President Truman. It created a crisis for the president, who feared that the incident would have a disastrous impact on the committee’s work and undoubtedly lead to some public embarrassment. To confer on the situation, Truman immediately called David Niles, whom he trusted to be discreet and who already had a close personal relationship with Crum. Truman and Niles decided that Crum should be persuaded to remain on the committee, and Truman requested that the special assistant draft a conciliatory message to send to Crum in Europe.

In his message to Crum, Niles wrote that he sympathized with “the provocation” of obstructionists in the State Department that was making Crum “madder every day.” Niles reiterated that there could be “no interim report” but he insisted that this was not an “attempt on the part of any one over here to suggest how the Commission should conduct itself.” Niles asked Crum to “be patient and calm down” as the president “wants to assure you that he has every confidence in you and that he hopes...you will do nothing rash. I assured him that you would not.”⁵⁶ Niles’ intercession proved decisive. Upon receipt of Niles’ letter, Crum chose to remain on the committee.⁵⁷

⁵³ Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Niles to Crum, February 20, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1952, Box 29, HSTL.

⁵⁷ Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, 130.

The crisis over Crum's potential resignation was successfully averted, but as the AACI continued its deliberations in early 1946, Truman found himself in another quandary related to the committee's indecisiveness on the issue of Jewish immigration. As the deadline approached for the submission of the AACI final report, news from American Zionists and from within the committee reached the White House that the American members were divided in their opinions over the immediate transfer of the 100,000. They had apparently been influenced by British members of the committee who "stood intransigent against Jewish immigration"⁵⁸ and were, in Crum's words, "completely unsympathetic and even resentful toward Jewish hopes in Palestine."⁵⁹

Niles became intimately involved in the conflicts within the committee. Concerned at the prospect that the AACI would endorse an anti-Zionist, pro-British solution, Nahum Goldmann, a prominent Jewish Agency representative, wrote to Niles on April 5 to request that Truman cable Judge Hucheson expressing his desire that the committee be unanimous in its support of Jewish immigration. Hucheson had up to that point maintained his independence and was leaning against Zionist aspirations in Palestine. Goldmann implored Niles that it was "extremely essential that the boss in Washington should cable [Hucheson], encouraging him...to bring about a quick solution of the whole problem."⁶⁰ At Niles' request, President Truman cabled Hucheson on April 9, 1946. Truman praised the chairman for the "fine impression you and your committee are making everywhere." "According to my reports you all fully justify the confidence placed in you." Yet Truman made it unambiguous that he wished Hucheson to unite the committee in support of the transfer of the 100,000. "Looking forward eagerly to receipt

⁵⁸ Sachar, "David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine," 23-24.

⁵⁹ Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, 130.

⁶⁰ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 58.

of report.” Truman said, “Hope it will represent *unanimous opinion of commission members.*”⁶¹

A week later, Crum informed Niles that disagreements continued within the committee, a communication that caused the special assistant considerable anxiety. In response, Niles pushed for another message to be sent from Truman to Hutcheson to ensure the committee was united. On April 16, 1946 Niles wrote to Appointments Secretary Matthew Connelly asking that Truman send a cable Niles drafted to the American members of the committee. The cable read “it is my deep and sincere wish that the American delegation shall stand firm for a program that is in accord with the highest American tradition of generosity and justice.”⁶² During the final deliberations, Hutcheson took into account Truman’s personal interest in the committee’s report, and backed a unanimous proposal for immediate immigration. Truman’s intervention via Niles proved to be crucial. As Crum remembered, “in the end, it was the leadership of Judge Hutcheson which kept us all together. He would not permit our initial differences to result in a breakup of the committee into American and British groups...had it not been for him, the final report would not have been unanimous.”⁶³

On April 20, 1946, the AACI submitted its report, which recommended that Britain immediately authorize the admission of 100,000 Jews into Palestine. The report matched Truman’s original request for Jewish immigration. It also urged the abrogation of the British White Paper.⁶⁴ It fell short, however, of endorsing the Zionist program of a

⁶¹ Truman to Hutcheson, April 9, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL. Emphasis added.

⁶² Truman to Hutcheson, April 16, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

⁶³ Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, 265.

⁶⁴ “The Anglo American Committee of Inquiry Report: Chapter I,” Undated, David K. Niles Papers, Displaced Persons and Immigration File, 1937-1952, Box 28, HSTL.

Jewish state and recommended the continuance of the British Mandate in Palestine, “pending the execution of a trusteeship agreement under the United Nations.”⁶⁵ On April 25, President Truman released a statement, thanking the committee for its recommendations and Judge Hutcheson “for the uniting efforts which you have exerted in preparing the report.”⁶⁶

The date agreed upon for publication of the AACI report in both Washington and London was May 1, 1946. In the meantime, Crum and James McDonald met with Rabbi Silver and AZEC and together they decided that “the best way of handling the report would be for [President Truman] to issue a statement endorsing the recommendations for the 100,000 and coming out against the White Paper.”⁶⁷ In this effort, Niles played a crucial role. Rabbi Silver and AZEC Vice Chairman Emmanuel Neumann prepared a draft of Truman’s statement, which was sent to Niles, who carried it on to the president.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, in London, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, fearful that an endorsement of the AACI report from Truman would deliver a “great blow to the white paper regime,” wrote urgently to Byrnes to delay it.⁶⁹

Truman, however, ignored Bevin’s request and released his statement along with the report on April 30, 1946. Truman announced: “I am very happy that the request which I made for the 100,000 Jews into Palestine has been unanimously endorsed by the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry.... I am also pleased that the Committee recommends in effect the abrogation of the White Paper of 1939.... It is also gratifying

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1946* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), 216.

⁶⁷ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 63.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 127.

that the report envisages the carrying out of large scale economic development projects in Palestine which would facilitate further immigration and be of benefit to entire population.”⁷⁰

Truman’s pro-Zionist statement, drafted by Silver and Neumann and edited by Niles, was considered an historic achievement for Zionist diplomacy.⁷¹ Although Truman had not explicitly endorsed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and left “questions of long range political policies” to “careful study” that he would immediately “take under advisement,” there was reason for Zionists to be optimistic.⁷² Indeed, the president felt that the findings of the committee were “pointing in the right direction.”⁷³ The debate over Jewish immigration, however, was far from over. As the British retreated from taking action on the AACI report, the Truman-Niles partnership again came to the fore in pressing the case for Zionism.

The Breakdown of Compromise: Niles and the Morrison-Grady Plan

Following Truman’s endorsement of the AACI report, the president found himself in the now familiar position of working amidst conflicting pressures. The British, eager to maintain Arab good will and their own hegemony in the Middle East, were reluctant to take action on the committee’s recommendations.⁷⁴ On May 7, 1946, David Niles received a letter from Crum, claiming that the British had no intention of accepting the report of the AACI or putting it into effect promptly.⁷⁵ Beset by violent attacks from the Jewish resistance movement and its fierce paramilitary group, the Irgun, Whitehall

⁷⁰ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1946*, 218-219.

⁷¹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 64.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷³ Truman, *Memoirs*, 146.

⁷⁴ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 65-67.

⁷⁵ Crum to Niles, May 7, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

believed that the enforcement of any policy to which the Arabs objected would undermine their position even further and lead to widespread disturbances.⁷⁶ Wholehearted support for the British approach came from the State Department. Henderson argued for the continued military and political dominance of the British in Palestine as a bulwark against the Soviets.⁷⁷ He recommended negotiations be held with the British to formulate a long-range Anglo-American policy before allowing any Jewish refugees to enter Palestine.⁷⁸

While British and American foreign policymakers struggled to reach an Anglo-American consensus regarding the political future of Palestine, Zionists called on the president to take immediate action to transfer the 100,000 Jewish displaced persons to Palestine. Stunned that Truman's April 30 statement supporting Jewish immigration had not led to the refugees' immediate release, AZEC flooded the White House with telegrams and letters that clamored for Truman to live up to his word.⁷⁹ On May 8, 1946, President Truman wrote to Prime Minister Attlee, citing the report of the AACI and expressing the urgency of lifting the barriers to Jewish immigration to Palestine.⁸⁰

A specter of relief from the impasse came in Attlee's response, which proposed a conference in London to negotiate a joint Anglo-American position on the AACI report and establish the means to implement the report's recommendations. Consultations would occur with both Arab and Jewish representatives and attempts would be made to mollify

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁷ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 595-596.

⁷⁹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 68.

⁸⁰ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 596-597.

both sides.⁸¹ Truman agreed to Attlee's request on May 16 and appointed Henry F. Grady as head of the American mission to London.⁸²

During the period between Truman's agreement to the conference and the departure of the Grady Mission to London on July 11, Truman made himself inaccessible to Zionists.⁸³ In all likelihood, this stemmed from the president's increasing weariness and irritation with Zionist demands and the intensity of activities in preparing for negotiating with the British.⁸⁴ In this context, David Niles played a critical back-door role, strengthening the case for the Jewish refugees and for Zionism. Niles acted as a crucial counterpoint to anti-Zionists who took Truman's refusal to meet with American Zionists as an opportunity to press their own views on the president.

On May 15, 1946, Truman received a letter from Myron Taylor, his personal representative to the Pope, suggesting that too much pressure on the Arabs would result in violent resistance. "My own firm conviction," Taylor claimed, "is that this presents with certainty the next war." The Soviet Union would take advantage of a war in Palestine to make inroads in the Middle East. American support for Zionism, according to Taylor, would draw the Middle East closer to the Soviets and embolden Arabs to "meet the Western world, with aggressive strength in the days to come." Taylor also underplayed the importance of Jewish immigration to Palestine, arguing that "Germany, Austria and Poland should not be depopulated of their Jewish population by a mass impulse of the Jewish nationals to move to more prosperous lands."⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 606.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 607-608.

⁸³ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 71.

⁸⁴ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 132 and Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 71.

⁸⁵ Taylor to Truman, May 15, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

Truman gave the letter to Niles and asked for his comments.⁸⁶ On May 27, 1946 Niles returned the letter to Truman with a memorandum that refuted each of Taylor's observations. The prediction of a Third World War was exaggerated, Niles told Truman: "I am inclined to think that if, God forbid, there was a future war it would not be because of the transference of these poor refugees." Rejecting Taylor's assertion that Zionism would play into the hands of the Soviets, Niles reminded the president that "members of the Anglo American Commission were told privately that the Russians would not look with disfavor on the transference of 100,000 Jews to Palestine." Palestinian Jews would, in fact, further American interests in the region. "I am also inclined to think," Niles asserted, "that 100,000 Jews would be of great assistance to us in that area as the Jews of Palestine were during the second World War, which is generally admitted by everybody who is familiar with the situation. The allies got no help from the Arabs at all but considerable help from the Jews in Palestine." Finally, Niles stressed the urgency and importance of resolving the plight of the Jewish refugees. According to Niles, Taylor himself called the refugee crisis "an emergency need." The transference of the 100,000 "should help that emergency," Niles claimed.⁸⁷

In his response to Taylor, Truman adopted Niles' views. He stressed his commitment to the Jewish refugee issue. "When I proposed the immediate entry of 100,000 Jews into Palestine I had in mind, of course, the desperate situation faced by the remnant of European Jewry. I note that you also are sensitive to that emergency." Reminding Taylor that he had set aside long-range proposals "for further study," Truman

⁸⁶ Truman to Niles, May 23, 1946, Harry S. Truman Papers, PSF: Chronological Name File, 1945-1953, Box 246, HSTL.

⁸⁷ "Memorandum for the President," May 27, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

categorically rejected the ambassador's opinions on Jewish immigration. The president wrote, "the emergency need in Europe is so great" that Palestine should "absorb as many Jewish emigrants who wish to enter as is humanely possible."⁸⁸

Truman, though at the time loath to see Zionists, welcomed the recommendations of Niles, who shared the president's views on solving the refugee problem. But the Truman-Niles partnership transcended a mere coincidence of viewpoints. As a plan for Palestine known as the Morrison-Grady plan emerged out of the conference in London, Niles demonstrated his ability to drastically alter the president's approach to the Palestine question. On June 11, President Truman sent the Grady Mission to negotiate a joint Anglo-American position on the AACI report and to plan the implementation of its proposals.

Prior to the Grady Mission, Truman's basic approach to the Palestine question, as David Niles told Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld, Director of the Committee on Unity for Palestine on July 26, was that he was only interested in the "operational level" - in other words an exclusive focus on the transfer of the 100,000. The president refused to countenance the use of American forces and "consistently avoided any discussion of the political future of Palestine."⁸⁹ As the Morrison-Grady plan emerged out of the London Conference, Truman, under pressure from Whitehall and the State Department, was temporarily won over to the idea of maintaining British control in Palestine. Through Niles' intervention, however, Truman became convinced of the inadvisability of the plan.

A week after Grady's arrival in London, he and Herbert Morrison, a close of advisor of Foreign Secretary Bevin, presented the Morrison-Grady plan for Palestine.

⁸⁸ Truman to Taylor, May 27, 1946, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

⁸⁹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 77.

The plan was for provincial “autonomy,” dividing Palestine into an Arab province, a Jewish province, a District of Jerusalem, and a District of the Negev, all ruled by a central government under the exclusive control of the British. The Morrison-Grady plan ignored the AACI’s urgent recommendation regarding the 100,000 displaced persons and was immediately rejected by both Arabs and Jews.⁹⁰

Despite how little the Morrison-Grady plan offered the president, Truman evidently leaned toward endorsing it.⁹¹ This undoubtedly stemmed from the Truman administration’s rapidly deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union in the spring and summer of 1946 over crises in Iran and Turkey.⁹² With tensions rising between Washington and Moscow, “the president and his advisors had to think twice about a policy in Palestine that promised to alienate America’s Cold War allies in Britain and that threatened to propel the Arabs, with all their oil, into the Soviet orbit.”⁹³ Consequently, Truman became disinclined to “quarrel with the British over the political future of Palestine.”⁹⁴ State Department officials told Truman that they saw the Morrison-Grady plan as a “step in the right direction.”⁹⁵ On July 29, Byrnes wrote to Truman from Paris that the new proposal was “the best solution of this difficult problem that can now be secured.”⁹⁶ He included with his telegram a press release he had drafted declaring Truman’s support for the plan. The British, for their part, submitted hasty, ambiguous

⁹⁰ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 652-667.

⁹¹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 132-134 and Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 79.

⁹² Truman, *Memoirs*, 149.

⁹³ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism*, 81-82.

⁹⁴ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 79.

⁹⁵ Little, *American Orientalism*, 82.

⁹⁶ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 673.

assurances to the president that they intended to send the 100,000 refugees to Palestine “as soon as [the White House] decided to go ahead with the plan.”⁹⁷

All this was enough to convince Truman that the Morrison-Grady plan “was the solution.”⁹⁸ Even the wave of Zionist entreaties in late July could not dissuade the president from accepting the federal plan. In an interview with James McDonald on July 27, in which the AACI member attacked the Morrison-Grady plan, Truman retorted angrily, “Hell, you can’t satisfy these people.... The Jews aren’t going to write the history of the U.S. or my history.”⁹⁹ Senators Robert Wagner and James Mead of New York, who were also present during the McDonald interview, insisted that endorsing the plan would have negative political ramifications with their constituents. Unmoved, Truman snapped, “I am not from New York. I am from the Middle West. I must do what I think is right.”¹⁰⁰

By July 29, President Truman was at the “very point of endorsing the Morrison-Grady plan.”¹⁰¹ Without the intervention of David Niles, Truman would almost certainly have published Byrnes’ draft press release. Fearing that the Morrison-Grady plan would overshadow the possibility of a Jewish state and provoke intense American Jewish hostility, Niles made his opposition to the program known to the president on July 30. Niles told the president that “on no account should he endorse the new plan” and recommended that Truman postpone his decision on the Morrison-Grady plan until he could “recall the six American members of the joint committee and lock them up with the three members of Grady’s team until they jointly found a way out of the impasse.” Since

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 670.

⁹⁸ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 81.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 174.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 81.

¹⁰¹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 134.

the Morrison-Grady plan had ignored the AACI's recommendations on the Jewish refugees, Niles argued that a face-to-face meeting of the two groups would put pressure on the London Conference delegates to pursue an alternative. At the same time, recalling Grady for a meeting in Washington would give Truman more of an opportunity to judge the implications of endorsing a British federal plan. Any public statement or commitment by Truman, Niles argued, should be withheld "until after [that] meeting."¹⁰²

Niles' recommendations were critical for instilling doubts in the president's mind about the wisdom of the Morrison-Grady plan. This was evident in a cabinet meeting later that day, where Truman took an uncompromising stand against his senior foreign policy advisors. The entire meeting was devoted to discussing the Palestine problem. Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal pushed the president to "[go] ahead with the British."¹⁰³ But Truman reversed his conciliatory approach to the State and War Departments and presented his advisors with "a sheaf of telegrams about four inches thick from various Jewish people" lambasting the Morrison-Grady plan.¹⁰⁴ When Forrestal asserted that rejecting the scheme would anger Saudi Arabia, whose oil would be critical "if another war came,"¹⁰⁵ President Truman said "he wanted to handle this problem not from the standpoint of bringing in oil but from the standpoint of what is right."¹⁰⁶ By the end of the meeting, Truman told Acheson to cable Byrnes that he would not go along with the Morrison-Grady plan.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Connelly, Memorandum to the President, July 30, 1946, Harry S. Truman Papers, Official File: 1945-1948, Box 1372, HSTL.

¹⁰³ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 134.

¹⁰⁴ Henry A. Wallace, *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace, 1942-1946* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 606.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 607.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 606.

The Truman-Niles partnership prevented the president from making an immediate endorsement and convinced him to postpone his decision to accept the Morrison-Grady plan. How did Niles achieve the reconsideration of U.S. support for the plan? As Truman sought a buffer against the intense pressures within his administration and in the public at large in the summer of 1946, Niles came to the fore as a less prominent but highly trusted counselor. Exasperated by pressures from both sides - from Zionists, who “disturbed and annoyed”¹⁰⁸ the president and from his senior foreign policymakers, who showed little concern for the Jewish refugees – Truman relied on the policy recommendations of David Niles, who made his views clear outside the harsh light of public politics and administrative disputes.

After the cabinet meeting of July 30, Truman immediately called Niles to relay his decision. Niles later told Zionist diplomat Leo Kohn that he “actually broke down” on the telephone with Truman, seeing “how nice it was of the president to have rung him personally, knowing how he felt on the subject.”¹⁰⁹ On August 7, 1946, Truman wired Attlee an official rejection of the Morrison-Grady plan and Niles’ intervention became a major coup for Zionism. Unbeknownst to the special assistant, his counsel would soon move President Truman to see partitioning the Holy Land as the right course of action in Palestine.

¹⁰⁸ Truman, *Memoirs*, 158.

¹⁰⁹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 136.

III. TRUMAN VS. THE WISE MEN: THE UN PARTITION RESOLUTION

*The Jews were for partition — but not all the Jews. The Arabs were against partition — but could not agree how completely they were against it. The British, at least, seemed of one mind: They were determined to wash their hands of the whole matter. It was a discouraging prospect indeed.*¹

-Harry S. Truman

By mid-1946, Harry Truman's outlook on the Palestine question was bleak. He felt "defeated over the failure of the Anglo-American Committee and the Morrison-Grady Plan. His best efforts to find a solution had gone nowhere."² He had begun to see the problem as "insoluble."³ Nevertheless, in the fall of that year, as his focus shifted from the resettlement of a relatively small number of Jewish refugees in Palestine to finding a workable long-range solution for the region as a whole, Truman experienced a major turning point in the evolution of his view of the Palestine crisis. With the advice and encouragement of David Niles, President Truman came to support a partition plan for the Holy Land and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

The Debate Continues: Niles and the Prelude to Partition

Truman's frustration with the Palestine problem was well founded. The British remained unalterably attached to their "access to the oil resources of the Middle East" and stood "most reluctant to antagonize the Arabs."⁴ Zionist leaders in the United States were merciless in their barrage of "all sorts of pressure...to commit American power and forces on behalf of the Jewish aspirations in Palestine." Truman was fed up with the

¹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 157.

² Radosh and Radosh, "Truman, Jews, and Zionists," 102.

³ Truman, *Memoirs*, 153.

⁴ *Ibid.*

intransigence of both sides. Truman wrote to a friend, “not only are the British highly successful in muddling the situation as completely as it could possible be muddled, but the Jews themselves are making it almost impossible to do anything for them.”⁵ Worse still, the situation on the ground in Palestine was rapidly deteriorating. In July, the Irgun bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, site of the central offices of the British Mandate, demonstrated that the Jews were “ready to take up arms against the Grady-Morrison proposal.”⁶ Overwhelmed and aggravated, Truman considered getting the United States “out of the picture completely,” a policy that would have very much pleased the State Department.⁷

David Niles took Truman’s vexation seriously. On August 2, 1946, he phoned Dr. Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress, to tell him that Truman was “fed up with both the British and American Zionists,” and was “threatening to wash his hands of the whole matter.”⁸ It was urgent that the Zionist movement present Truman with a realistic alternative to the Morrison-Grady plan, lest the president accept a stalemate in Palestine. The withdrawal of Truman’s attention and support would be a devastating loss for Jewish aspirations.⁹

Goldmann agreed that if Truman actually washed his hands of the Palestine issue it would be “a worse catastrophe than an open state of war with England.”¹⁰ In fact, Goldmann, a long-time supporter of the creation of two states in Palestine, was already working furiously on a counterproposal to the Morrison-Grady plan. In view of the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Little, *American Orientalism*, 82.

⁷ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 87.

⁸ Radosh and Radosh, “Truman, Jews, and Zionists,” 103.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ibid.

unanimous rejection of the British federal plan, Goldmann came to believe that of the three remaining options for the political future of Palestine – trusteeship, binationalism, and partition – the latter was the only acceptable alternative. Trusteeship, which would put Palestine under the exclusive control of the British, represented the “worst deal because England had become an anti-Zionist force.”¹¹ A binational state would entrench Arabs and Jews politically and foment their continuing rivalry. Partition, on the other hand, would separate the two peoples, reduce friction, foster economic cooperation, and eventually lead to “good relations between the two people.”¹²

“A Hell of a Fix:” The Goldmann Mission to Washington

In August 1946 the World Jewish Congress sent Goldmann to Washington to convince Truman to support “a Jewish state...in a part of Palestine.”¹³ Truman’s direct approval would be difficult to achieve, however, as his doors were shut to the Zionists. Goldmann was keenly aware of the president’s frustration. In a message to David Niles, Goldmann lamented that David Ben Gurion, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Jewish Agency, was powerless to get an appointment with Secretary of State Byrnes. Byrnes dismissed Ben-Gurion’s request on the grounds that he “resent[ed] Zionists and other criticism of the State Department concerning the Palestine policy.”¹⁴ When Niles showed that piece of correspondence to the president, Truman gave vent to his growing agitation with the Zionists. In a hand-written note, Truman replied: “Dave:- I don’t blame [Byrnes] much. Imagine Goldman [sic], Wise & Co. coming in after a round with a

¹¹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 85.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Truman to Niles, July 8, 1946, Harry S. Truman Papers, PSF: Chronological Name File, 1945-1953, Box 246, HSTL.

bandit like Molotov on Trieste and the Tyrol! – reparations, displaced persons, and hell around. Think probably I'd tell him to jump in the Jordon [sic].¹⁵

In view of Truman's hostile mood toward Zionist pressure, Goldmann decided on a back-door approach, hoping to sway key foreign policy advisors in the administration to endorse partition. On August 5, 1946, Goldman cabled Niles, requesting that he arrange for him to meet with Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson.¹⁶ Acheson was a member of the Cabinet Committee on Palestine and Related Problems, composed of the Secretaries of State, War, and the Treasury, established by Truman as a resource in formulating and implementing Palestine policy amidst conflicting pressures.¹⁷

Goldmann reasoned that if the undersecretary could be convinced of the wisdom of partition, the entire Cabinet Committee might be won over to the idea of a Jewish state.

On August 7, 1946, after a lengthy telephone conversation with David Niles, Goldmann met with Acheson to argue for the creation of two states in Palestine, one Jewish and one Arab.¹⁸ Goldmann stressed the advantages that partition would have from an American perspective. He claimed that it would satisfy Jewish needs for sovereignty and immigration, guaranteeing support from a majority of Jews and friends of Zionism in the United States.¹⁹ Partitioning Palestine, Goldmann claimed, would placate the British because the Jewish state would “gladly regard England as its ally and allow it the use of military bases.”²⁰ The Arabs would also benefit, Goldmann asserted, citing secret

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 89.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁸ Evyatar Friesel, “Toward the Partition of Palestine: The Goldmann Mission in Washington, August 1946,” in *Nahum Goldmann: Statesman Without a State* edited by Mark A. Raider (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 184.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90.

²⁰ Ibid. and *FRUS* 1946, VII: 681-682.

negotiations between the Jewish Agency and Arab leaders who indicated they would “accept the partition solution if both the British and the U.S. governments supported it.”²¹

For Acheson, however, who was not a Zionist and “had opposed the creation of Jewish state amidst the Arab Middle East,” Goldmann’s most compelling argument was the lack of any reasonable alternative to partition.²² Pointing to the violence of the Irgun extremists against the British in Palestine, Goldmann argued that any solution short of partition would lead to “terror” in the Holy Land.²³ This would put the Truman administration “in a hell of a fix” in which the United States would be forced “to help the English fight the Jews after Auschwitz.”²⁴ This apparently is what sold Acheson on partition. The undersecretary told Goldmann he was “the only Zionist leader who considers not just what is good for the Jews (an egoistic people who care only about themselves) but also what is good for the United States.”²⁵ Acheson said he would accept the partition plan if Goldmann could persuade David Niles and two members of the Cabinet Committee, John Snyder and Robert Patterson.²⁶

The task of convincing Niles and the two secretaries was a testament to Goldmann’s skill as a Zionist diplomat. To be sure, obtaining Niles’ support was considerably less arduous than winning Acheson’s – the special assistant gave his immediate, wholehearted endorsement. Likewise, Treasury Secretary Snyder “proved receptive to the partition idea and Goldmann found no difficulty in convincing him.”²⁷

Secretary of War Patterson presented more of a challenge, however. At first, Goldmann

²¹ Friesel, “Toward the Partition of Palestine,” 184-185.

²² Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 90.

²³ Quoted in *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

²⁶ Friesel, “Toward the Partition of Palestine,” 185.

²⁷ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 91.

failed to get an appointment with the secretary. In desperation, he reached out to Judge Joseph Proskauer, president of American Jewish Committee and a colleague and close friend of Patterson's, to intervene.²⁸ This in itself was done against incredible odds. Indeed, Judge Proskauer was one of the most prominent American Jewish anti-Zionists who believed that a Jewish state "would be catastrophic for the Jews."²⁹ In a long and emotional meeting on August 7, Goldmann managed to convince the life-long anti-Zionist to support partition. With arguments reminiscent of those that swayed Acheson, Goldmann implored Proskauer: "You will fight the Jews in Palestine after Auschwitz because they want to have a Jewish state? You will be torn to pieces between your loyalty to American and your loyalty to the Jewish people... This is a chance for you to play a great role in the history of the Jewish people. I have to see Patterson. I want you to take me with you to see Patterson."³⁰

Attracted apparently by a sense of self-importance, Proskauer agreed to alert Patterson and promised he would "back [Goldmann] up in the request... that the U.S. government [endorse] a Jewish state in Palestine."³¹ With Proskauer's support, Patterson willingly accepted the partition option for Palestine.³² Having secured separate approvals from all three advisors, Goldmann could now be assured of Acheson's support.

At an August 8, 1946 breakfast meeting, Goldmann informed Niles of the previous day's accomplishments. The two men then proceeded to map out further strategy.³³ They agreed that Goldmann should put the partition plan on paper, inform

²⁸ Ibid., 91.

²⁹ Michael T. Benson, *Harry Truman and the Founding of Israel* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 130.

³⁰ Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 92.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Friesel, "Toward the Partition of Palestine," 185.

³³ Ibid.

Acheson of the Cabinet Committee endorsement, and ask that he take the news to President Truman.³⁴ The next day, Goldmann informed Acheson that Niles, Patterson, and Snyder were in agreement with partition. The undersecretary lived up to his word, endorsing the partition plan himself and taking it immediately to the president. Niles joined Acheson in the Oval Office for what proved to be a momentous meeting with Truman. Niles and Acheson laid out Goldmann's arguments for the president, expressed their own support for partition, and asked Truman his opinion. After reading the paper copy of the partition proposal, Truman gave his support.³⁵

While Niles and Acheson were meeting with the president, Nahum Goldmann, Leo Kohn, and Jewish Agency Representative Eliahu Epstein, waited anxiously in Niles' hotel room for news of Truman's reaction. Niles returned that evening "deeply moved."³⁶ With tears in his eyes, he burst into the room, threw himself down on the bed and began to sob. In Yiddish, he shouted, "if my mother could hear that we are going to have a Jewish state."³⁷ Niles informed the Zionists that Truman had endorsed the partition scheme and had instructed Acheson to inform the British.³⁸ The special assistant had contributed significantly to ushering in a radical shift in the president's view of the Palestine crisis. For the first time, Truman expressed support for partition and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

³⁴ Nahum Goldmann, *Sixty Years of Jewish Life: The Autobiography of Nahum Goldmann* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 235.

³⁵ Friesel, "Toward the Partition of Palestine," 186.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Quoted in Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 93.

³⁸ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 140.

The Zionists Make Progress: Truman's Yom Kippur Statement

In the wake of Truman's private endorsement of the partition plan, Zionists pushed the president to make his views public. On August 30, Goldmann requested that Truman issue a statement in support of partition. The State Department immediately advised the president against Goldmann's request. William L. Clayton, undersecretary of state for economic affairs, wrote to Truman, "we do not believe that any statement at all should be issued" that would antagonize the Arabs and jeopardize the United States' "vital security interest in the Middle East."³⁹ Truman remained reluctant to make his views public and on September 14 he sent Clayton's memo to Niles, with a copy of his response to the State Department.⁴⁰ The president stated, "in regard to a statement on Palestine, I have been very hesitant about saying anything on this subject. I hope it will not be necessary for me to have anything to say. If I do, I'll certainly clear it with you."⁴¹

Truman's hesitation worried Niles, who agreed with Goldmann that the president ought to announce his support for partition. The special assistant took it upon himself to intervene with the president, arguing that the approaching midterm elections provided a politically advantageous moment to issue a public statement. In early October 1946, news had reached the White House that Thomas E. Dewey, Republican Governor of New York and a potential presidential candidate, "was going to make a strong statement in favor of Jewish immigration in his speech before the United Palestine Appeal on October 6."⁴² Dewey's statement, which would sit foursquare with the Zionist position, might swing Jewish votes toward the Republican Party. Niles urged Truman to "beat Dewey to the

³⁹ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 694-695.

⁴⁰ Truman to Niles, September 14, 1946, Harry S. Truman Papers, PSF: Chronological Name File, 1945-1953, Box 246, HSTL.

⁴¹ Merrill, *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*, 31.

⁴² Sachar, "David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine," 44.

punch.”⁴³ It was part of the president’s responsibility to help Democratic congressmen, senators, and governors get reelected, Niles argued, and “the Jewish vote in New York was going to be crucial.”⁴⁴

Truman was apparently impressed by Niles’ exposition. The special assistant’s advice was corroborated on October 3 when the British announced that they were going to postpone the conferences they were still conducting with Arabs and Jews over the Morrison-Grady plan until December 16. Truman realized that this meant another setback for the Jewish refugee problem and anticipated that the British delay would strengthen political attacks from Republican candidates in the upcoming midterm elections.⁴⁵ With this in mind, Truman dropped his previous hesitation about making a public statement on partition. On October 3, he sent a direct communication to Prime Minister Attlee saying that “in view of the deep sympathy of the American people for these unfortunate victims of Nazi persecution” he found it necessary to “make a further statement at once on the subject.”⁴⁶

On October 4, 1946, the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, President Truman issued a statement endorsing the partition plan for Palestine. Truman began by reaffirming his commitment to the Jewish refugee crisis and the Palestine question. He reviewed the Harrison Report, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, and the Morrison-Grady plan, emphasizing his repeated appeals for the immediate immigration of 100,000 Jewish displaced persons. On the crucial question of partition, he declared the plan a potential “solution of the Palestine problem” and for the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 105.

⁴⁵ Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 188.

⁴⁶ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 701.

first time indicated publicly United States support for the “creation of a viable Jewish state.” This state would “be in control of its own immigration and economic policies” and reside in “an adequate area of Palestine.”⁴⁷ On October 10, Truman wrote to Prime Minister Attlee as a follow up to the Yom Kippur statement. The message was the most forceful he had ever sent on the subject of the displaced persons. Making clear his frustration with the British, Truman asserted that it was the obligation of England to “foster the development of the Jewish national home.”⁴⁸

In the Yom Kippur statement, Truman endorsed a Jewish political future in Palestine. While previously, the president had held to an exclusive focus on the transfer of 100,000 Jewish refugees, he finally spoke out to endorse partition as a long-range solution for the region as a whole. Due in large part to David Niles, Truman underwent a major turning point in the evolution of his stance on Palestine. This did not, however, make the establishment of a Jewish state inevitable. The controversy over partitioning the Holy Land, in fact, was only just beginning for President Truman.

A Pyrrhic Victory

While American Zionists were celebrating their victory in the Yom Kippur statement, President Truman had only grown more solemn and isolated on account of it. Whitehall’s forewarnings of Arab hostility to Truman’s public statement were immediately substantiated. On October 15, 1946, Saudi monarch Ibn Saud wrote an irate letter to Truman protesting the Yom Kippur statement and lamenting American support

⁴⁷ Statement by the President, October 4, 1946, David K. Niles, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL and *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1946*, 442-444.

⁴⁸ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 707.

for “Zionist aggression against a friendly Arab country.”⁴⁹ Truman’s remarks constituted a “breach of previous American promises to the Arabs,” Saud asserted.⁵⁰ For its part, the State Department clamored for continued British control over a unitary Palestine. On October 23, Loy Henderson warned that the immigration of Jewish Communists into Palestine would increase Soviet influence there.⁵¹

At first, Truman stood steadfast against the aftershocks of the Yom Kippur statement. On October 25, the president replied to Ibn Saud’s letter in a plainspoken and resolute manner. He informed the Saudi king that he believed a “Jewish National Home” should be established in Palestine.⁵² He refuted Saud’s assertion that Jewish leaders “contemplate[d] a policy of aggression against the Arab countries adjacent to Palestine”⁵³ and maintained that his statements in no way represented a failure to live up to previous assurances, which only promised consultations with the Arabs prior to any basic change of the situation in Palestine. Consultations with both Arabs and Jews had been held on numerous occasions in 1946, Truman stated.⁵⁴

Truman’s forceful attitude weakened abruptly in early November, however. On November 5 news reached the White House that despite the president’s Yom Kippur statement, Republicans trounced the Democrats in the New York elections. This had a serious effect on Truman.⁵⁵ In the month since his public address, British and American

⁴⁹ *FRUS* 1946, VII: 709.

⁵⁰ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 112.

⁵¹ Benson, *Harry Truman and the Founding of Israel*, 89 and Michael J. Devine, Robert P. Watson, and Robert J. Wolz, Eds., *Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman* (Kirksville: Truman State University, 2008), 98.

⁵² *FRUS* 1946, VII: 715.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 716.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 717.

⁵⁵ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 145.

anti-Zionists were attributing Truman's statement to electoral politics.⁵⁶ Truman was embarrassed and hurt by accusations that "he had exploited the Palestine question for domestic political gain...[and] to make matters worse, this...had no effect on the elections results, which resulted in a Republican avalanche."⁵⁷

Electoral politics had certainly played some role in Truman's Yom Kippur address. Niles had told the president that the election was one reason he should support partition. But Truman's decision was driven foremost by his commitment to the "immediate problem of finding means to relieve the human misery of the displaced persons,"⁵⁸ not by domestic political considerations. As he wrote to Georgia Senator Walter F. George regarding the Yom Kippur statement, "I am not interested in the politics of the situation, or what effect it will have on votes in the United States. I am interested in relieving a half million people of the most distressing situation that has happened in the world since...Hitler made his invasion of Europe."⁵⁹ White House Counsel Clark Clifford confirmed Truman's sentiment in his account of the partition decision. Clifford rejected the notion that the Yom Kippur statement was primarily "a play for the Jewish vote." On the contrary, with his statement the president was determined to "strength[en]...his sentiments on the refugees" by "express[ing] his deepest convictions on the sheer human tragedy" of the displaced persons.⁶⁰ Truman's primary concerns were humanitarian, which explains his exasperation over charges that he was merely a shrewd political manipulator.

⁵⁶ Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 195.

⁵⁷ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 145.

⁵⁸ Truman, *Memoirs*, 145.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 192.

⁶⁰ Clark M. Clifford, "Recognizing Israel: 1948 Story," *American Heritage* (April 1977), 6.

The “personal attacks and insinuations” against Truman in late October brought the president once again to the point of washing his hands of the Palestine matter entirely.⁶¹ The Palestine morass that put Truman’s deep humanitarian convictions against the intransigence of the State Department, the British, and the Arabs, led the president to briefly withdraw from the issue. In early November 1946, Truman returned the official supervision of the Palestine problem to the State Department and declined all further appointments with Zionists.⁶² He thereupon entered a period of silence on the Palestine issue that lasted until the “\$64 dollar question” became a matter for the United Nations.⁶³

The Road to Lake Success

In January and February of 1947, the British convened a second London Conference, their final attempt to retain exclusive control over Palestine. They met again with the Jews and the Arabs hoping to sell both sides a new scheme for British trusteeship. The British plan envisaged a continuance of the mandate for five years, after which a unitary Palestine would become independent. The Arabs objected to the new scheme’s allowance of 100,000 Jewish refugees to be admitted to Palestine over two years. Zionists protested that a unitary state, in which Jews were a minority, would ultimately lead to exclusive Arab political control. Both parties immediately rejected England’s final proposal.⁶⁴

Failing to obtain Arab-Jewish agreement in the second London Conference, on February 7, 1947 the British government announced that it would terminate its mandate for Palestine. On February 18, Bevin announced in the House of Commons that the

⁶¹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 154.

⁶² Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 146.

⁶³ Quoted in Devine, *Harry S. Truman, The State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, xv.

⁶⁴ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 118-119.

government was referring the Palestine question to the United Nations. The matter became increasingly urgent when, between February and April, Palestine experienced the bloodiest months in its history, with terrorism taking a heavy toll on British lives. On April 2, the British government sent an urgent letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, requesting that the Palestine question be addressed at the next regular session of the General Assembly, and that the assembly be called into special session to appoint a Palestine commission to prepare a basis for recommendations.⁶⁵

On April 28, 1947, the Special Session of the United Nations opened at Lake Success, New York. It immediately appointed a Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) composed of eleven neutral nations hitherto not involved in the Palestine matter to study the issue and report back to the assembly by September.⁶⁶ On June 16, the committee began conducting its hearing in Palestine. While UNSCOP deliberated, Zionist officials engaged in a global effort to enlist support for the partition program. The Zionist movement solicited as many United Nations member states as possible, a campaign mounted in the face of overwhelming odds. As one historian described their predicament: “Even discounting the Arab states, Zionist diplomacy would still have to work with fifty states...all attempts to establish [contact with the Russians] were rebuffed by the Kremlin. The Asian bloc was hostile to Zionist aspirations, and its leader, India, was concerned with gaining the favor of the Arabs. The South American...members maintained ties with the Arabs states, and also contained large communities of

⁶⁵ Fred J. Khouri, *The Arab-Israeli Dilemma*, 2nd Edition (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 38.

⁶⁶ *FRUS* 1947, V: 1072. The eleven member nations of UNSCOP were Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, the Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay, and Yugoslavia.

Arabs...The Latin American countries were influenced by the Vatican...to oppose the creation of a Jewish state.”⁶⁷

The anti-Zionist leanings of many nations in the General Assembly were not the Zionists’ only problem. The Jewish state idea also faced intense opposition from most senior foreign policy officials in the Truman administration. Between June and September 1947, the State Department initiated a crusade against partition and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. NEA chief Loy Henderson, a fervent anti-Communist, maintained that British dominance in the Middle East was a crucial stabilizing influence and “barrier against Russian expansion.”⁶⁸ He argued intensely that the maintenance of Arab good will was vital to American national interests. Support for Henderson’s arguments came from Robert A. Lovett, who replaced Dean Acheson as undersecretary of state. Lovett shared Henderson’s opposition to the Jewish state program. He as well as Secretary of Defense Forrestal insisted on the primacy of Cold War considerations, oil concerns, and Arab and British friendship.⁶⁹

Under Henderson’s direction, these foreign policy “wise men” set out to secure a measure of State Department control over the U.S. delegation to the United Nations. A delegation that understood the dangers of partition, Henderson thought, might tilt the General Assembly against Jewish statehood. To this end, Henderson lobbied for George Wadsworth, former United States Ambassador to Syria and Lebanon who was now ambassador to Iraq, to be appointed as a political advisor to the American representatives at the United Nations. Wadsworth was an “ardent pro-Arab” and was “known to oppose a

⁶⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁸ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 126.

⁶⁹ Little, *American Orientalism*, 82-84.

Jewish state.”⁷⁰ Henderson succeeded in placing Wadsworth in the delegation in September 1947.⁷¹

As Henderson campaigned for the selection of his pro-Arab appointee in July, Zionist leaders desperately sought to offset Wadsworth’s influence on the delegation. David Niles made this enterprise possible. On July 29, 1947, he presented a memorandum to the president, insisting on a measure of pro-Zionist reform in the ranks of the advisors to the American delegation at the UN. Niles lamented that “the key advisors on Palestine to the United States delegation...[were] Loy Henderson and George Wadsworth,” who were “widely regarded as unsympathetic to the Jewish viewpoint.”⁷² Niles asserted that “on the basis of their past behaviour and attitude, I frankly doubt that they will vigorously carry out your policy.”⁷³ According to the special assistant, “much resentment [would] be engendered” if Henderson took his campaign against partition to the General Assembly and Truman would personally “be held responsible.”⁷⁴

Niles advocated the appointment of General John Hilldring to the delegation, an advisor in whom American Jewry had “complete confidence.”⁷⁵ In his post as assistant secretary of state for occupied areas, Hilldring had “demonstrated a humane and compassionate attitude toward the displaced persons...and understood the Jewish yearning for Palestine.”⁷⁶ Niles advised Truman that Hilldring’s appointment would satisfy American Zionists and “insure that your viewpoint is effectively expressed.”⁷⁷

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷¹ *FRUS* 1947, V: 1152.

⁷² Niles to Truman, “Memorandum for the President,” July 29, 1947, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945 to June-July 1948, Box 29, HSTL.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 127.

⁷⁷ Niles to Truman, July 29, 1947, David K. Niles Papers.

Truman took the special assistant's suggestion and promptly appointed Hilldring as an advisor to the American delegation at the United Nations.⁷⁸

The appointment of General Hilldring marked another triumph for Niles in outflanking the State Department opposition to a Jewish state and making his own views felt with the president. The special assistant's approach was reminiscent of his efforts to convince Truman to appoint Bartley Crum and other Zionist sympathizers to the AACI. In both scenarios, Niles came into direct conflict Loy Henderson. Yet in advising Truman to appoint Hilldring, Niles became increasingly assertive and forthright. Niles attacked Henderson's competence in a direct and candid fashion, telling Truman that the NEA director "continue[d] to misinterpret your policy" and was worthy of "suspicion."⁷⁹

Niles' frankness was one indication of the growth in the Truman-Niles partnership since 1945. Another indication was Truman's awarding of Niles the coveted Medal for Merit around the same time of their correspondence on Hilldring and Henderson.⁸⁰ The citation was for Niles' role as an advisor to the War Production Board, not for his work on the Palestine problem specifically. Nonetheless, it demonstrated that the president increasingly regarded Niles as one of his most important counselors. Presenting the award, Truman thanked Niles for his "numerous contributions" that represented "invaluable service to his country."⁸¹ The honor was an unambiguous display of the president's trust and confidence, encouraging the special assistant to take a more direct and forceful approach with Truman.

⁷⁸ Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 290.

⁷⁹ Niles to Truman, July 29, 1947, David K. Niles Papers.

⁸⁰ "Citation to Accompany the Award of the Medal for Merit to David K. Niles," July 16, 1947, David K. Niles Papers, General File, Box 34, HSTL.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The Wisest of the Wise Men: George Marshall and American Support for Partition

As the Palestine question moved to a vote at the United Nations General Assembly, Niles' outspokenness with Truman and his countermoves against the State Department continued to be decisive at the White House. On August 31, 1947 UNSCOP issued its report, which recommended that Great Britain terminate its mandate for Palestine and grant it independence at the earliest possible date. The report also recommended by a majority vote that Palestine be partitioned into Jewish and Arab states. The partition issue then moved back to Lake Success to be decided by a vote of the General Assembly, which was scheduled for late November.

With the opening of the General Assembly session in September 1947, Arabs and Jews marshaled all their forces to influence the United Nations' decision. Both sides recognized that the fate of the partition plan lay primarily with the decision of the United States.⁸² In the following month, Zionists and anti-Zionists endeavored furiously to tilt Truman one way or the other. General George Marshall, the new secretary of state, expressed his reluctance to endorse the partition of Palestine in an address to the United Nations on September 17. The general was in a unique and extraordinary position to influence Truman's decisions in foreign policy. Truman revered Marshall's career and character and considered him the "greatest military man" in American history.⁸³ The president was "ecstatic at the appointment of Marshall" to secretary of state and gave the general a "free hand" over proceedings at Foggy Bottom.⁸⁴

⁸² Howard M. Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East: 1936-1954* (New York: Herzl Press, 1972), 496.

⁸³ Arnold A. Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 186.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Marshall had remained undecided on partition since January 1947 and declined to take an official stance on Palestine throughout the summer.⁸⁵ In the lead up to the General Assembly vote, however, Marshall, at the urgings of Loy Henderson and other officials, leaned away from partition. On September 22, Henderson sent a memorandum to the secretary of state, arguing against United States' advocacy of the partition proposal. The establishment of a Jewish state, he asserted, was opposed by "nearly every member of the Foreign Service or the Department who has worked to any appreciable extent on Near Eastern problems."⁸⁶ Henderson reiterated the dangers of "Soviet penetration into important areas free as yet from Soviet domination" and that "any plan for partitioning Palestine would be unworkable."⁸⁷ Implementing the partition plan would undoubtedly require enormous American contributions in "force, materials, and money."⁸⁸ In subsequent memoranda, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and numerous other officials warned that partition would enable the Soviet Union to replace the United States and Great Britain in the region and would endanger United States access to Middle East oil.⁸⁹ These arguments had a considerable impact on Secretary Marshall.

With Marshall tilting against partition, Truman remained undecided at the beginning of October 1947.⁹⁰ What then led the president to declare American support for the UN partition of Palestine on October 11? Two private interventions - one by Eddie Jacobson, the other by Clark Clifford and David Niles - were the decisive factors in securing Truman's support. On October 3, Jacobson, Truman's ex-business partner

⁸⁵ Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 290.

⁸⁶ *FRUS* 1947, V: 1153.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1154-1155.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1155.

⁸⁹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 162.

⁹⁰ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 157.

and lifelong friend, wrote the president an emotional appeal for American support of partition. Truman commented later that Jacobson had “never...asked me for anything since [I had] been in the White House and since we [had] been friends.”⁹¹ For Truman, this meant that his request must have been of extraordinary importance. Jacobson wrote: “The future of one-half million Jews in Europe depends on what happens at the present meeting of the United Nations...In all this world, there is only one place where they can go – and that is Palestine...if it were possible for you, as leader and spokesman of our country, to express your support of this action, I think we can accomplish ours aims before the United Nations Assembly...Harry, my people need help and I am appealing to you to help them.”⁹²

The other crucial factor in persuading Truman was the intervention of the only two genuine allies of the Zionist cause at the White House, Clark Clifford and David Niles. Niles again came to the fore as a counterbalance to State Department views, this time in a direct confrontation with Loy Henderson in Truman’s presence. Several days after Henderson had submitted his long anti-Zionist memorandum to Marshall, Clifford read the memo and summoned the NEA director to the White House to defend his views at a meeting with Truman. When Henderson arrived, he found the president with Clifford and Niles. The advisors informed Henderson that it was the president’s understanding that he was “opposed to the United States adopting a position of supporting the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine.” Henderson was asked to give his reasons. He then endured a relentless cross-examination by Clark Clifford, who “took the lead in the conversation.” Henderson recalled Clifford’s assault: “What were the

⁹¹ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman.*

⁹² Jacobson to Truman, October 3, 1947, Harry S. Truman Papers, PSF: Subject File, 1940-1953, Box 160, HSTL.

sources of my views? Were they merely my opinions which might be based on prejudice or bias? Did I think that my judgment and that of members of my office were superior to that of the intelligent group that the United Nations had selected to study and report on the Palestine problem?”⁹³

As the meeting wore on the questioning became “more and more rough.” According to Henderson, the exchange became less about clarifying policy and more about Clifford and Niles “trying to humiliate and break me down in front of the President.” As the cross-examination intensified, Truman stood up and muttered, “Oh hell. I’m leaving.” Henderson took that to mean that Truman would not come out in favor of partition. At the end of the meeting, Henderson thought that Truman was “not at all convinced that even at that late date...to go all out for the establishment of the Jewish state.”⁹⁴

Henderson misinterpreted the president’s view. Niles and Clifford had, in reality, done significant damage to the State Department’s anti-partition campaign. By calling Henderson’s expertise into question, they led Truman to question the wisdom of the arguments of the NEA and other State Department Arabists. This, in concert with Eddie Jacobson’s appeal to Truman’s humanitarian convictions, stopped the president from changing his stance on partition. In another meeting with Clifford and Niles as well as Robert Lovett on October 8, 1947 Truman clearly declared American support for a Jewish state and instructed the State Department to make public American support for partition.⁹⁵ On October 11, Herschel Johnson, Truman’s Deputy Representative on the

⁹³ Oral History Interview with Loy W. Henderson, conducted June 14 and July 5, 1973, HSTL.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 157.

United Nations Security Council, announced United States support for UNSCOP's partition plan.⁹⁶

Niles the Zionist Diplomat

For the Zionist movement, obtaining American support for partition was a crucial steppingstone to a positive vote for the Jewish state at the United Nations on November 29. The support of the United States, "by common recognition the most powerful force in the world body," was perhaps the most crucial prerequisite to the passage of the partition measure.⁹⁷ Truman's support alone, however, would not be enough to pull off partition by the necessary two-thirds majority. Thus, the Zionists initiated a vigorous lobbying campaign aimed at convincing nations who remained undecided to support partition. They solicited both Truman and Niles for help to sway wavering votes.

Truman was exceedingly reluctant to intervene personally with United Nations member states. He stated, "I have never approved of the practice of the strong imposing their will on the weak."⁹⁸ On October 17, President Truman wrote to Senator Claude Pepper in this same frame of mind: "I received about 35,000 pieces of mail and propaganda from the Jews in this country while this matter was pending. I put it all in a pile and struck a match to it -- I never looked at a single one of the letters because I felt the United Nations...should not be interfered with."⁹⁹ According to Margaret Truman's account, the president "did his utmost to remain neutral during the vote. He was deeply disturbed by the pressure which some Zionist leaders put on him to browbeat South

⁹⁶ Devine, *Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, 99.

⁹⁷ Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East*, 496.

⁹⁸ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morroy & Company, 1973), 384.

⁹⁹ Devine, *Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, 99.

American countries and other nations where he might have influence into supporting partition.”¹⁰⁰

Truman followed a neutral line, refusing to intervene personally for partition and never instructing the State Department to lobby energetically for the plan.¹⁰¹ While Truman declined to participate, David Niles became a potent and effective Zionist diplomat by using his own influence to sway crucial undecided votes toward partition. In November, Niles persuaded Edward Stettinius to use his business connections to compel Liberia to support partition. Liberia depended on the Firestone Company to purchase rubber, the country’s primary export. At Niles’ suggestion, Stettinius got “Harvey Firestone, fearful of a Jewish boycott of his products, to advise” the Liberian president that “if his country’s vote were not revised the Firestone company would have to reconsider its plans for extending its holdings in his country.”¹⁰² Liberia promptly dropped all hesitation and pledged to support partition.

Niles also succeeded in procuring a positive French vote for partition. Fearful of hostile reactions from Arabs in the North African colonies, France preferred to remain neutral on partition. Niles persuaded the influential Bernard Baruch, a self-made millionaire, head of the War Industries Board during World War I, and an advisor to President Roosevelt during World War II, to deliver a “stiff warning to the French delegate that the United States would cut off its aid if France voted against partition.”¹⁰³ Though the threat was undoubtedly hyperbolic, French hesitation promptly evaporated.

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 384.

¹⁰¹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry and Palestine*, 144.

¹⁰² Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 169.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 170.

In addition to lobbying recalcitrant UN delegates, Niles fought to secure a “more forward presidential promotion of the UN partition.”¹⁰⁴ Through Niles, Chaim Weizmann, the world’s most prominent Zionist, was able to make his case personally to Truman on November 19. A second intervention by Eddie Jacobson also proved decisive. In a two-page wire to the president, Jacobson pleaded with Truman for his leadership in securing the necessary two-thirds vote for partition.¹⁰⁵ Influenced by these private petitions, Truman, at the very last minute, set aside his neutrality and instructed the American delegation to the United Nations to use its influence to guarantee a two-thirds majority. Though this occurred only one day prior to the UN vote, Truman’s last-minute instructions to lobby for the plan succeeded in swinging the votes of several additional nations.¹⁰⁶

On November 29, 1947 the United Nations General Assembly approved the partition plan for Palestine put forward by UNSCOP. Thirty-three nations voted for partition, thirteen against, and ten abstained.¹⁰⁷ The UN partition divided Palestine into two entities: a Jewish state and an Arab state with the area around Jerusalem under international control. The extraordinary Zionist achievement was due in large part to David Niles at the White House, who facilitated a major evolution in Truman’s view of the Palestine crisis from that of a short-term transfer of Jewish refugees to a long-range solution for the region. In the lead up to the UN decision, the special assistant secured a public endorsement from the United States and swung crucial undecided votes toward partition.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 168.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 168, 172.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁷ *FRUS* 1947, V: 1291.

Aided by Niles at the White House, the establishment of a Jewish state received the sanction of a majority of the international community. In Washington, however, the divisions over Palestine persisted. In the wake of the passage of the partition resolution, anti-Zionists in the administration resolved to have the United States reverse its policy. The State Department's determination to retreat from partition pushed Truman's Palestine policy into its gravest crisis yet.

IV. AGAINST THE EXPERTS: TRUMAN'S RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL

On my desk at the White House I used to keep a quotation from Mark Twain which said: "Always do right, this will gratify some people and astonish the rest."¹

-Harry S. Truman

The passage of the partition resolution at the United Nations established the political pre-conditions for the eventual creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Middle East experts in the Truman administration, however, refused to accept the partition decision as a *fait accompli*. Between November 1947 and March 1948, the State Department mounted a crusade aimed at reversing American support for partition. They triumphed on March 19, 1948 when United States Ambassador Warren Austin called on the UN Security Council to suspend the partition plan and put in its place a trusteeship in Palestine. The victory of the anti-Zionist forces within the Truman administration was due in large measure to the absence of David Niles, whose illness during this period removed a major roadblock to their efforts. Resuming his work in March, Niles played a leading role in the debate over American recognition of Israel. His counsel was the crucial factor in convincing Truman to become midwife to the new Jewish State.

The State Department Coup: Truman and America's Retreat from Partition

No sooner was the partition verdict announced at the United Nations than the State Department marshaled its forces to reverse Truman's pro-Zionist policy. In early December, State Department officials initiated a thorough review of American Palestine policy to assess the impact of partition "on the security interests of the United States."²

¹ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman.*

² *FRUS* 1947, V: 1283.

On December 17, a draft of a policy review conducted by the National Security Council and NEA claimed that Truman's support for the plan would "damage...U.S. interests" and result in a "loss of U.S. prestige."³ Since the Arabs had responded violently to partition, a decision by America to enforce it would be a highly dangerous and impractical line of policy. The review concluded by recommending a prompt abandonment of the partition plan: "The United States should immediately announce...that...partition...is impossible of implementation [sic]."⁴ A "UN trusteeship for Palestine" should be imposed instead. "Meanwhile...the British [should] remain in Palestine."⁵

Others foreign policy officials in Washington shared the NEA's desire to withdraw American support for partition. Secretary of Defense Forrestal, under pressure from Arabs and American oil companies, agreed with the argument that "partition must now be quietly dropped."⁶ Meeting with the president of the Socony Vacuum Company on January 6, 1948, Forrestal was shocked to hear that "as a consequence of the Palestine unrest, his company and other associated oil corporations were suspending work on [their] pipeline in Saudi Arabia."⁷ In response, Forrestal drafted a memo to Undersecretary Lovett on January 21, arguing that in view of the dangers involved in enforcing partition, "it would be 'stupid' to allow the situation [in Palestine] to develop in such a way as to either do 'permanent injury to our relations with the Moslem world' or to end in a 'stumble into war.'"⁸

³ Quoted in Zvi Ganin, "The Limits of American Jewish Political Power: America's Retreat from Partition, November 1947-March 1948." *Jewish Social Studies* 39 (Winter-Spring 1977): 1.

⁴ Quoted in Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Ibid.

⁶ Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 301.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Millis, *The Forrestal Diaries*, 359.

The State Department's fight against partition gained momentum in late January 1948. On January 28, George Kennan submitted a memo to Lovett, arguing resolutely against dividing Palestine. America, he claimed, "should take no further initiative in implementing or aiding partition."⁹ The next day, an important meeting occurred between key strategists of the anti-partition drive. In attendance were Dean Rusk and Loy Henderson of the State Department as well as Forrestal and his assistants from the Department of Defense. At the meeting, these officials reaffirmed their resolve to work together to turn back partition. They shared two considerations that they believed justified the American retreat from the plan. First, they agreed that the partition vote in the general assembly was merely "a recommendation to the Security Council" and thus "lacked any binding power."¹⁰ Second, and more importantly, "American support of this recommendation was predicated upon the assumption that it would be 'just and workable.'"¹¹ If Arab-Jewish violence in Palestine made implementing partition unfeasible, the United States could and should pursue an alternative.

In January 1948, in order to advance their bureaucratic offensive against partition, the State Department and Pentagon organized a campaign to sway public opinion away from the creation of a Jewish state. In late January, Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt and former member of Office of Strategic Services during World War II, published an essay in the prestigious *Middle East Journal* attacking partition. Ardently pro-Arab, Roosevelt was in the process of creating an anti-Zionist pressure group in Washington called the Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy

⁹ Quoted in Zvi Ganin, "The Limits of American Jewish Political Power," 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Quoted in Ibid.

Land.¹² In his article, Roosevelt asserted that “the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine [would] jeopardize the position of the United States” in the Middle East, by “disrupt[ing] the Arab world and eas[ing] the path of Soviet infiltration.”¹³ He reiterated the views of Truman’s senior foreign policy advisors that implementing partition would be unworkable, as the United States lacked any reasonable means to enforce it that would preserve Middle East peace.¹⁴ Roosevelt concluded by assailing American Zionists for conspiring to persuade Truman to “compromise American interests” and “dismiss the Russian threat to the United States.”¹⁵

Yet Roosevelt’s perception of the power of Jewish pressure on Truman stood in stark contrast to the actual precariousness of the Zionists’ position in early 1948. Truman’s irritation with the Jews and the Palestine problem had not diminished in the aftermath of the UN partition resolution.¹⁶ In addition, indications of Jewish military weakness in Palestine seemed to reinforce Truman’s worst fears that large quantities of American forces might be necessary to keep the peace in the Middle East. A string of successful Arab military operations in the winter of 1947-1948 cut off supply and communication lines to the *Yishuv* in Jerusalem, prompting David Ben Gurion to cable the Jewish Agency in New York requesting that it “urge immediately [an] international force or at least despatch [sic] equipment by U.N. or U.S. Cable.”¹⁷ Ben Gurion’s urgent appeal, which was forwarded immediately to the UN Security Council, confirmed the State Department’s warnings and greatly strengthened the anti-partition campaign.

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³ Kermit Roosevelt, “The Partition of Palestine: A Lesson in Pressure Politics,” *The Middle East Journal* 2 (January 1948): 9-10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁶ Ganin, “The Limits of American Jewish Political Power,” 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

Anti-Zionists Take the Upper Hand

The absence from the White House of David Niles, who fell ill with strep throat in late January and remained hospitalized in Boston until March 23, was a serious blow to the Zionist cause.¹⁸ Without Niles, always a powerful counterforce to anti-Zionists in the administration, the State Department had exclusive and uninterrupted access to the president throughout January and February. In Forrestal's words, Niles' "activities...at the White House and his going directly to the president on matters involving Palestine," actions which had seriously hindered the State Department, suddenly vanished.¹⁹

The loss of Niles' influence could not have come at a worse moment for the supporters of Jewish statehood, given the accelerating ferocity of the anti-partition campaign and the fact that Truman had once again closed his door to the Zionists. Truman recalled in his memoirs that following the partition vote at the UN, "I found it necessary to give instructions that I did not want to be approached by any more [Zionist] spokesmen."²⁰ To be sure, Truman had shut out Zionists in the past, but they had consistently relied on Niles to represent their views directly to the president. Most recently, Chaim Weizmann, through Niles, had been able to make the case for partition in a meeting with Truman on November 19, 1947. With Niles powerless to intervene, Truman refused Eddie Jacobson's request in mid-February that the president meet with Weizmann a second time.

Based on the arguments of anti-partition advocates, Truman became increasingly wary of the wisdom of partition. Evidently, the deteriorating military situation of the Jews in Palestine and the looming prospect of a full-scale civil war convinced Truman of

¹⁸ Niles to Connelly, January 28, 1948, Harry S. Truman Papers, Official File, Box 1372, HSTL.

¹⁹ Millis, *The Forrestal Diaries*, 361.

²⁰ Truman, *Memoirs*, 160.

the correctness of the NEA's argument that "the partition plan was not enforceable."²¹ Truman was "concerned about the possibility of Soviet exploitation of the Palestine conflict and was *not* prepared to have partition imposed by outside force," as seemed necessary in early 1948.²² By February, Truman agreed with the State Department on the imprudence of dividing Palestine.²³

Disaster Strikes in Washington: Austin's Surprise Speech at the United Nations

With Truman leaning away from partition, State Department officials prepared their first major diplomatic maneuver against the resolution. On February 22, they persuaded Truman to approve a policy statement drafted for Ambassador Warren Austin to present to the UN Security Council two days later.²⁴ The draft "made the legalistic argument that the Security Council was not empowered to enforce a political settlement, but only to [keep] the peace."²⁵ Speaking to the UN Security Council on February 24, Ambassador Austin hinted that the United States was contemplating a retreat from partition. He called the plan an "underlying political difficulty"²⁶ and proposed that the Security Council establish a committee to "look at once into the question of the possible threats to international peace arising in connection with the Palestine situation."²⁷

Having engineered what appeared to be an official statement that the United States was reconsidering its stance on partition, the State Department proceeded to press Truman to advocate trusteeship as an alternative solution for Palestine. Lovett

²¹ Arthur Honig, "The Whisper in the Leader's Ear: How Do Foreign Policy Advisers Perform their Job?" *International Relations* 22 (June 2008): 234.

²² Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 189-190 and Truman, *Memoirs*, 159-160.

²³ FRUS 1948, V: 593.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 648-649.

²⁵ Honig, "The Whisper in the Leader's Ear," 233.

²⁶ "Discussion of the Palestine Problem in the Security Council", Statement by Ambassador Warren R. Austin, February 24, 1948, *The Department of State Bulletin* 456 (March 7, 1948): 297.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

recommended to Truman that if the UN Security Council found the partition resolution unworkable, “it would be then clear that Palestine is not yet ready for self-government and that some form of United Nations trusteeship for an additional period of time will be necessary.”²⁸ In a memo to George Marshall, Truman approved the trusteeship scheme “in principle.”²⁹ He wrote to the secretary of state that he would accept trusteeship if the United Nations found partition unfeasible. The president insisted, however, that “nothing should be presented to the Security Council that could be interpreted as a recession on our part from the position we took in the General Assembly.”³⁰

Truman’s approval of trusteeship, if only in principle, enhanced the confidence of State Department officials in their influence on the president and emboldened their efforts against partition. In mid-March, when the UN Palestine Commission failed to arrange any compromise between Arabs and Jews, the State Department interpreted the failure as meeting Truman’s condition that if implementing partition became impossible, the plan could be abandoned and trusteeship adopted instead.³¹ Thus, on March 19, 1948, with no prior authorization from President Truman, Ambassador Austin made a surprise speech to the UN Security Council claiming the United States no longer supported the partition plan but desired a temporary trusteeship for Palestine instead. “My government believes that a temporary trusteeship for Palestine should be established...to afford the Jews and Arabs of Palestine, who must live together, further opportunity to reach an agreement regarding the future government of that country...we believe that the Security Council

²⁸ FRUS 1948, V: 640.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 645.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 739 and Honig, “The Whisper in the Leader’s Ear,” 234.

should instruct the Palestine Commission to suspend its efforts to implement the proposed partition plan.”³²

At a press conference the following day, Marshall expressed his support for Ambassador Austin’s proposal. He reiterated that the United States no longer supported the partition plan but instead sought to work within the United Nations to bring a peaceful settlement to Palestine. According to Marshall, the proposal for a temporary trusteeship for Palestine was “the only suggestion...which appears to offer any basis for action by the United Nations to meet the existing situation in Palestine.” Marshall noted that he had recommended this course of action “to the President, and he approved my recommendation.”³³

Marshall was clearly referring to his correspondence with the president on February 23, in which Truman gave his hypothetical approval for trusteeship. The president, however, was neither informed of nor in agreement with the contents of Ambassador Austin’s speech. Indeed, he was stunned and enraged at Austin’s statements. Clark Clifford remembered the president’s “bewilderment and consternation evoked by the trusteeship speech.”³⁴ On March 21, the president wrote to his sister Mary Jane Truman regarding the “shocking arrogance of the State Department career men.” The “striped pants conspirators” in the State Department, he claimed, had “completely balled up the Palestine situation.”³⁵

Despite Marshall’s claim that the president had pre-approved the new line of policy, Truman’s activities in the weeks prior to the trusteeship speech suggest that

³² “U.S. Position on the Palestine Problem,” Statement by Ambassador Warren R. Austin, March 19, 1948 *The Department of State Bulletin* 456 (March 28, 1948): 407.

³³ *Ibid.*, 408.

³⁴ Clifford, “Recognizing Israel,” 7.

³⁵ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 389.

Austin's bombshell was engineered without the president's knowledge and against his wishes. In early March, as Truman was pressed by the State Department and Pentagon to give his blessing to the retreat from partition, advisors at the White House continued to aggressively advocate active support of the plan. In two long memoranda to the president, Clark Clifford argued that the best guarantee of Middle East peace was not to retreat from partition but to make vigorous efforts to implement it.³⁶ Clifford claimed that the arguments of the State Department were "completely fallacious" and that "supporting partition is in complete conformity with the settled policy of the United States."³⁷ Partition, Clifford held, was the only hope of avoiding United States military involvement, strengthening the American position vis-à-vis Russia, and achieving a permanent solution to the Palestine problem.³⁸

According to Clifford, Truman took these recommendations under careful consideration, meaning that he had not entirely "abandoned his support for partition."³⁹ Truman confirmed this on March 13, when, after an emotional meeting with Eddie Jacobson, he finally agreed to meet with Chaim Weizmann regarding partition. Jacobson walked into the White House without an appointment and, waving at a small statue of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office, began to shout: "[President Jackson] has been your hero all his life, hasn't he?...I have never met the man who has been my hero all my life...But I have studied [Weizmann's] past as you have studied Jackson's. He is the greatest Jew alive, perhaps the greatest Jew who ever lived...He has traveled thousands

³⁶ Clifford to Truman, March 6-8, 1948, Clark M. Clifford Papers, Subject File: 1945-1954, Box 14, HSTL.

³⁷ Clifford to Truman, March 8, 1948, Clark M. Clifford Papers.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Clifford, "Recognizing Israel," 6.

of miles to see you, and now you are putting off seeing him. That isn't like you."⁴⁰

Jacobson succeeded in changing the president's mind. "You win, you baldheaded son-of-a-bitch. I will see him,"⁴¹ Truman told his friend. The president immediately instructed his appointments secretary to schedule a sit-down with Weizmann at the earliest possible date.

There is no official record of the 45-minute meeting between Truman and Weizmann on March 18, 1948. Other sources, however, indicate that Truman promised the Jewish Agency president continued United States support for partition.⁴²

Weizmann's wife, Vera, recorded in her account of the meeting that Truman said that he "supported partition."⁴³ Truman's memoirs suggest that he wished to keep open the possibility of a Jewish state by reassuring Weizmann that "I knew what it was he wanted."⁴⁴ Austin's surprise announcement of trusteeship came the day after Truman's private assurances to Weizmann. In his diary, Truman fumed that "the State Department has reversed my Palestine policy," putting him in the position of "a liar and a double-crosser." The president continued, "There are people on the 3rd and 4th levels of the State Dept. who have always wanted to cut my throat...[and] they are succeeding in doing it."⁴⁵ Clifford remembered Truman saying, "How could this have happened? I assured Chaim Weizmann that we were for partition and would stick to it. He must think I'm a

⁴⁰ Truman, *Memoirs*, 161.

⁴¹ Quoted in Bruce S. Warshal, "Truman's 1947 'Anti-Semitic' Diary Entry" in Devine, Michael J., Robert P. Watson, and Robert J. Wolz, *Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman* (Kirksville: Truman State University, 2008), 17.

⁴² Clifford, "Recognizing Israel," 6.

⁴³ Vera Weizmann and David Tutaev, *The Impossible Takes Longer: The Memoirs of Vera Weizmann, Wife of Israel's First President*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 228-229.

⁴⁴ Truman, *Memoirs*, 161.

⁴⁵ Robert H. Ferrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 127.

plain liar.”⁴⁶

Truman’s stunned and furious reaction to Austin’s speech is evidence that the State Department took Truman’s comments in a way that supported their goals. The crisis created by Austin’s actions also points to the key role played by David Niles at the White House. The special assistant was sorely missed in the first months of 1948. Despite the pro-partition appeals from other advisors to Truman in early March, it was difficult without Niles to “keep up with the State Department work all the time,” especially in the throes of the accelerating anti-partition drive.⁴⁷ Free of the careful supervision Niles had kept on its anti-Zionist maneuvering at Foggy Bottom, the State Department found itself with enough leeway to reverse American policy. As one historian observed, had Niles been present, “better monitoring by the White House staff could have alerted the President to Austin’s expected speech and might have aborted it.”⁴⁸ Deprived of the countervailing counsel of his trusted advisor, Truman was nearly swayed to the anti-Zionist position of the foreign policy establishment, encouraging the State Department to make an unprecedented move against partition. Resuming his work in March, Niles provided the means to counter anti-Zionists and to find an acceptable way out of the dilemma.

Niles at the Helm: Truman and American Recognition of Israel

Niles returned to the White House from Boston on March 23, 1948, resuming his activities in the midst of the crisis created by the trusteeship announcement. The day of Niles’ return, the leadership of the *Yishuv* categorically rejected the American trusteeship

⁴⁶ Quoted in Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 303.

⁴⁷ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 207.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

scheme proposed by Austin on March 19 and announced that it intended to establish a provisional Jewish government in Palestine no later than May 16.⁴⁹ Thereafter, the major question confronting President Truman was deciding whether to recognize the new Jewish state.⁵⁰ In this, Truman again found himself confronted by conflicting pressures. American Zionists assailed the president for backpedaling on Zionist aspirations in Palestine. The State Department clung to its ill-fated trusteeship scheme and made strenuous efforts to prevent Truman from recognizing the Jewish state when it came into existence.⁵¹ In the course of the debate, David Niles' advice and influence succeeded in convincing President Truman to recognize the State of Israel on May 14, 1948.

In the days following the trusteeship debacle, Truman moved quickly to respond to the political setbacks and resentment he suffered as a result of Austin's statement. This was no minor undertaking. Indeed, Clifford recalled that after the trusteeship episode, "every Jew thought that Truman was a no good son-of-a-bitch."⁵² Leading pro-Zionist Democrats attacked Truman harshly for his retreat from partition. The New York State Democratic Committee, for example, announced that it would no longer support Truman if he ran for a second term.⁵³ In a press conference on March 25, Truman attempted to mollify his irate critics. "It is vital that the American people have a clear understanding of the position of the United States in the United Nations regarding Palestine," the president began. If the United Nations agreed to trusteeship, he continued, it would only be a temporary measure intended to establish peaceful conditions so that a "final political settlement" could be reached. Trusteeship, the president insisted, would

⁴⁹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry, and Israel*, 171.

⁵⁰ Clifford, "Recognizing Israel," 10.

⁵¹ Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 309-310.

⁵² Quoted in Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 193.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 202.

not be a “substitute for the partition plan.”⁵⁴

Through private channels, Truman tried to reassure the Zionists that he still supported partition. On April 11, the president met with Eddie Jacobson, who recorded that “[Truman] reaffirmed, very strongly, the promises he had made to Dr. Weizmann and to me; and he gave me permission to tell Dr. Weizmann so, which I did.”⁵⁵ In this meeting, Truman also gave the first indication that he wished to recognize the Jewish state when the British mandate ended in mid-May. Jacobson wrote, “it was at this meeting that I also discussed with the President the vital matter of recognizing the new state, and to this he agreed with a whole heart.”⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the State Department ignored the *Yishuv*'s intention to proclaim an independent state in Palestine and continued its campaign for trusteeship. At the end of March, Ambassador Austin proposed a modified trusteeship scheme to the UN Security Council consisting of a truce in Palestine that would suspend all political and military activities. He also recommended convening a special session to consider further the future government of Palestine.⁵⁷ In a meeting in early April, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and State Department officials paid no attention to the coming independence of the new state and continued to uphold trusteeship. Dean Rusk made familiar arguments against the establishment of a Jewish state - that it would allow the Soviets to “take definite steps toward gaining control in Palestine” and this would force the United States “to

⁵⁴ Statement by the President, March 25, 1948, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945, Box 29, HSTL.

⁵⁵ Devine, *Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, 102.

⁵⁶ Quote in *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Israel and the United Nations*, National Studies on International Organization (New York: Manhattan Publishing Company, 1956), 71-72.

intervene...[with] a substantially larger force than the force required simply to support a trusteeship.”⁵⁸

While State Department officials clung to trusteeship and disregarded the impending proclamation of a Jewish state in Palestine, David Niles took steps to prevent their views from overwhelming those of the Zionists, as they had threatened to do in March.⁵⁹ To this end, Niles drew on his previous experience of placing Zionist sympathizers in key advisory positions. The special assistant recommended that Truman take the supervision of the Palestine problem away from the NEA and instead place it under the exclusive control of General John Hilldring, who had been Niles’ candidate for advisor to the American delegation to the UN. Niles also asked that Truman send two of the State Department’s most ardent anti-Zionists, Loy Henderson and Robert McClintock, abroad where they would have no further contact with the Palestine issue.⁶⁰

In his draft of policy, Niles pressed for the “replacement of Loy Henderson and McClintock promptly and their assignment far removed from Arab league affiliates and replacement by [a] prominent and capable...person.”⁶¹ On April 28, Truman took Niles’ recommendation and appointed General Hilldring, the outspoken pro-Zionist, as special assistant to the secretary of state for Palestine affairs. In his new post, Hilldring outranked Henderson and took over immediate and exclusive supervision of Palestine matters.

Niles’ proposals reflected a keen understanding of the president’s deteriorating relationship with the State Department. The president “never forgave the State

⁵⁸ Millis, *The Forrestal Diaries*, 410-411.

⁵⁹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 203.

⁶⁰ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 203.

⁶¹ Niles to Truman, “Actions,” Undated, David K. Niles Papers.

Department for the...debacle aroused by the trusteeship announcement,"⁶² which he felt had undermined the administration at home and abroad and turned his own party against him.⁶³ Truman lost much of his trust in the State Department in March 1948.⁶⁴ He wrote in his memoirs that "the difficulty with many career officials in the government is that they regard themselves as the men who really make policy.... They look upon the elected officials as just temporary occupants. Every President in our history has been faced with this problem: how to prevent career men from circumventing presidential policy. Too often career men seek to impose their own views instead of carrying out of the established policy of the administration."⁶⁵

Truman's decision to appoint Hilldring was also the culmination of efforts by Niles and other White House advisors to secure the administration's acceptance of the reality of a new state. The appointment of Hilldring reflected an increasing awareness in the administration that the Jews were inevitably going to establish an independent state in a few weeks' time.⁶⁶ By early April, Truman began to acknowledge the newly emerging reality in Palestine and made private assurances that he would support partition. He told Jacobson that he intended to recognize the State of Israel when it proclaimed independence. On April 23, Truman made a similar pledge to Weizmann, who had sent the president an emotional appeal for recognition two weeks before. Weizmann's plea stressed Truman's historic role in Jewish self-determination. He wrote to Truman, "The choice for our people, Mr. President, is between statehood and extermination. History and providence have placed this issue in your hands and I am confident that you will yet

⁶² Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 198.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Honig, "The Whisper in the Leader's Ear," 235.

⁶⁵ Truman, *Memoirs*, 165.

⁶⁶ Sachar, "David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine," 85-86.

decide it in the spirit of moral law.”⁶⁷ On April 23, Truman secretly informed Weizmann through Special Counsel Sam Rosenmann that if the UN General Assembly stuck to partition, he would then recognize the Jewish state immediately.⁶⁸

The practical reality of a Jewish state was reinforced by impressive military victories achieved by the Haganah in Palestine in early May. Jewish forces conquered the cities of Tiberias, Haifa, Safed, and Jaffa and defeated large segments of the military forces of the Palestinian Arabs.⁶⁹ These accomplishments undermined the dire warnings from the State Department of Arab military superiority and the inevitability of American military intervention.

In view of the considerable improvements in the situation on the ground in Palestine, David Niles submitted to Clark Clifford the first draft of a presidential statement of immediate recognition. In his draft, Niles proposed that Truman announce: “After a most exhaustive review of all angles of the situation, Secretary Marshall and I have concluded that we should recognize this practical reality, since it conforms to the resolution of the U.N., to the security interests of the U.S., and to the announced and oft repeated objective of the U.S. Government. We intend, therefore, to accord formal recognition to the Jewish Government in Palestine when it is established.”⁷⁰

The Case for Israel: The May 12 Meeting in the Oval Office

Niles’ draft of policy was predicated on the support of the Secretary of State for American recognition. George Marshall, however, stood with the rest of the State

⁶⁷ Quoted in David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 612.

⁶⁸ Meyer Wolfe Weisgal and Joel Carmichael, *Chaim Weizmann: A Biography by Several Hands* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 309-310.

⁶⁹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry, and Israel*, 182.

⁷⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*

Department on the issue. He gave unqualified support to the anti-Zionist experts in his department and refused to endorse the position coming from the White House for prompt recognition of the Jewish state.⁷¹ Marshall's views presented a difficult conflict for Truman because he disagreed with Marshall's recommendations on the Palestine question.⁷² Yet he revered and trusted the wisdom of a man he saw as the "greatest living American."⁷³

Truman believed he could not go forward without first achieving a consensus within his administration. The president sought to accomplish this in a crucial meeting he scheduled for May 12, to which he invited both White House advisors and State Department representatives. Truman hoped to use the meeting to persuade Marshall to support recognition. Far in advance, Truman summoned Clark Clifford to his office to tell him about the upcoming meeting. Marshall as well as other advisors would be in attendance, the president said, and he wanted Clifford to prepare a convincing argument for recognition. Truman stressed the gravity of the situation, instructing Clifford to prepare "as though you were going to make an argument before the Supreme Court. Consider it carefully, Clark, organize it logically. I want you to be as persuasive as you possible can be."⁷⁴

Instructing the forty-one-year-old white house counsel to debate the sixty-seven year old secretary of state presented Clifford with a daunting task.⁷⁵ Clifford said in retrospect, "virtually every American regarded General Marshall...with respect bordering

⁷¹ Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry, and Israel*, 183.

⁷² Elath, "Harry S. Truman," 37.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 324.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

on awe.”⁷⁶ He knew that the president could “not afford to lose Marshall” and it was his responsibility to convince the secretary to change his mind and endorse immediate recognition.⁷⁷ In preparation for the debate with the State Department, Clifford worked feverishly with David Niles and Max Lowenthal to prepare his oral argument. The aides helped develop the position that recognition of the Jewish state was the “only policy consistent with American national interests” and that it would “strengthen the American position in the Near East vis-à-vis the Soviets, eliminate or reduce bloodshed and violence in Palestine, and strengthen the United Nations.”⁷⁸

In the lead up to the May 12 meeting, Niles played another crucial role independent of his collaboration with Clifford, by meeting privately with the president. On May 11, Niles showed Truman a public opinion poll on American recognition of the Jewish state. Apparently, “80 percent of the press now favored recognition with the establishment of the state, and a majority of both parties in Congress and a majority of state governors supported immediate recognition.”⁷⁹ Niles also helped deluge the president with appeals for recognition by funneling to Truman letters from prominent Zionist figures including Judge Herbert Lehman, Judge Joseph Proskauer, and Bernard Baruch.⁸⁰

The pivotal meeting on recognition took place at four o’clock on May 12, 1948. In attendance were Clifford, Niles, and Matthew Connelly, representing the White House, and Marshall, Lovett, Fraser Wilkins, and Robert McClintock representing the State

⁷⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 211.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Department.⁸¹ Truman introduced the question of recognition and stated that he had organized the meeting “because he was seriously concerned as to what might happen in Palestine after May 15.” Marshall called recognizing the Jewish state “inadvisable” and asked Lovett to state the reasons. In a lengthy exposition on recent events in Palestine, Lovett played down the Haganah’s military accomplishments and put forward the usual warnings against American military intervention. “There was no doubt that the Jewish army had gained...temporary success,” Lovett stated, “but there was no assurance whatever that in the long range the tide might not turn against them,” at which point they would certainly “expect help from the United States.”⁸² He told Truman that the State Department desired that he “give further consideration to the possibility of a commission being appointed by the General Assembly to deal with the administration of Palestine.”⁸³

Truman then turned to Clifford, who had prepared a detailed presentation in favor of immediate recognition. His basic argument was that Truman had already gone on record in support of an independent state and that it was unrealistic to ignore that such a state would soon be in existence. “A separate Jewish state is inevitable,” Clifford asserted, “it will be set up in a few days” and since the Soviet Union would undoubtedly recognize it eventually, it is “better to recognize it now” and thus “steal a march on the USSR.”⁸⁴ Clifford also maintained that the establishment of a Jewish state was consistent with American national interests: “it is important for the long-range security of our country, and indeed the world, that a nation committed to the democratic system be established [in Palestine]...We should strengthen [the Jewish state] in its infancy by

⁸¹ *FRUS* 1948, V: 972.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 973.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 974.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 976.

prompt recognition.”⁸⁵ Clifford concluded by recommending that Truman make a statement at his press conference the next day announcing his intention to recognize the Jewish state.⁸⁶

When Clifford had finished, Truman turned the floor over to Marshall. The secretary of state had always disliked Clifford and “considered him a domestic political advisor who had no business interfering in foreign affairs.”⁸⁷ Marshall stated that “the suggestions made by Mr. Clifford were wrong...[and] the great dignity of the office of the President would be seriously diminished”⁸⁸ if Truman went through with recognition. “The counsel offered by Mr. Clifford was based on domestic political considerations,” he retorted, “[a] transparent attempt to win a few votes.”⁸⁹ Middle East policy “was not a matter to be determined on the basis of politics. Unless politics were involved, Mr. Clifford would not even be at this conference.”⁹⁰ “If the President were to follow Mr. Clifford’s advice,” he bluntly declared, “and if in the elections I were to vote, I would vote against the President.”⁹¹

Marshall’s opposition appeared to carry the day against recognition.⁹² Truman ended the meeting by saying that “he was fully aware of the difficulties and dangers of the situation, to say nothing of the political risks involved which, he, himself, would run.”⁹³ But Clifford refused to accept that he had lost the case for recognition. Speaking with Lovett by telephone later in the day, Clifford was surprised to hear that the

⁸⁵ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁷ Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 325.

⁸⁸ *FRUS* 1948, V: 975.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Quoted in Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1950), 319.

⁹¹ *FRUS* 1948, V: 975.

⁹² Little, *American Orientalism*, 86.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 976.

undersecretary “had been deeply disturbed ever since the meeting in the President’s office this afternoon” and that he wanted “to talk...more about this.”⁹⁴ Later, over a drink, Lovett told Clifford that he was alarmed at the disagreement between Truman and Marshall. To be sure, Lovett agreed with the secretary of state that recognition of the Jewish state prematurely was irresponsible but he was concerned more with the possibility of a messy “break between the President and General Marshall.”⁹⁵ This “would have unacceptable consequences,” Lovett claimed. “We [are] in the midst of the most difficult months of the Cold War and we [have] to avert a split in our ranks.”⁹⁶

Lovett asked Clifford if he could present Truman with a modified version of the State Department’s view that the president and General Marshall might agree upon. Clifford turned him down. “Bob,” he said, “there is no chance whatsoever that the President will change his mind on the basic issue. My presentation today was made at his instruction and represented his views. He wants to recognize the new state. So all I can say is that if anyone is going to give, it is going to have to be General Marshall, because – I can tell you now – the President is not going to give an inch.”⁹⁷ Lovett agreed to make one final attempt at persuading Marshall. “Let’s see what can be done at State,”⁹⁸ he said to Clifford.

On the morning of May 13, no one at the White House could be certain where Truman stood on recognition. Would he heed the advice of Marshall? Could he afford to break with such a venerated figure? At that day’s press conference, Truman rejected Clifford’s recommendation that he issue a statement about his intention to recognize the

⁹⁴ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 15-16.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Jewish state. When asked about the decision, Truman replied, “I will cross that bridge when I get to it.”⁹⁹

Unsure of Truman’s stance and with the *Yishuv* expected to declare independence the next day, David Niles took the opportunity to intervene with President Truman. The special assistant hoped to persuade the chief executive to recognize the Jewish state whether Marshall came around or not. Niles began by telling Truman that the United States should recognize the Jewish state before the Soviets did. Truman replied, “that is right, the western recognition should precede the Soviet bloc’s recognition, so as to give it the right slant from the beginning.”¹⁰⁰ This type of argument, however, had lost much of its persuasive power, having been exhausted by Clifford and other advisors.

Niles opted for a more personal approach, turning his attention to Truman’s historic role in Zionist yearnings for a homeland in Palestine. Niles told Truman that mass meetings of Jews were to be held around the world to celebrate the Jewish state. There would be a great “opportunity of acclaim” for Truman “if he recognized the Jewish state before the meetings.”¹⁰¹ Niles’ intercession had a critical impact on the president. Truman confessed that he disapproved of Marshall’s position and that he believed the secretary had “followed [his] subordinates.”¹⁰² Though the president made no direct assurance of recognition, he made it clear to Niles that he had not bought the arguments of Marshall and Lovett during the previous day’s debate.¹⁰³ Truman ended by saying that “some day he would show Niles...his appreciation for all [his] efforts.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1948* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 253.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Radosh and Radosh, *A Safe Haven*, 335.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 215.

Day of Decision: Truman Recognizes the Jewish State

When President Truman entered the Oval Office on the morning of May 14, 1948, the British had already lowered the Union Jack in Jerusalem. Chaim Weizmann informed Truman that by day's end, "the British Mandate will be terminated, and the Provisional Government of the Jewish State...will assume full responsibility for preserving law and order within the boundaries of the Jewish State." Weizmann expressed his "[deep] hope that the United States, which under your leadership has done so much to find a just solution will promptly recognize the Provisional Government of the new Jewish State."¹⁰⁵ At four o'clock in Palestine, David Ben Gurion read a Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed the existence of a Jewish state called Israel beginning at midnight.

Throughout the day, Truman was "under unbearable pressure."¹⁰⁶ He was inclined to recognize the Jewish state that afternoon. He recorded in his memoirs that "I had often talked with my advisors about the course of action we would take...and it was always understood that...we would recognize any responsible government the Jews might set up."¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, right up until the Jewish state declared its existence, the State Department clamored for an alternative course of action. It urged a few days' "postponement of recognition"¹⁰⁸ until details of the new state's proclamation of independence could be confirmed. Otherwise, it argued, the Truman administration

¹⁰⁵ Weizmann to Truman, May 13, 1948, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945 to June-July 1948, Box 29, HSTL.

¹⁰⁶ *FRUS* 1948, V: 1005.

¹⁰⁷ Truman, *Memoirs*, 164.

¹⁰⁸ *FRUS* 1948, V: 1005.

“would lose the effects of many years of hard work in the Middle East with the Arabs.”¹⁰⁹

The solidifying factor in Truman’s final decision to recognize the Jewish state was a turnaround in George Marshall’s attitude. In the late afternoon, Lovett phoned Clifford to say, “Clark, I think we have something we can work with. I have talked to the General. He cannot support the President’s position, but he has agreed that he will not oppose it.”¹¹⁰ In the previous thirty-six hours, Lovett had managed to persuade Marshall to put his “loyalty to the chief executive” before his “fury with the Missouri Democrat.”¹¹¹ Clifford took the news to Truman, who replied, “that is all we need.”¹¹² Saved from a cataclysmic break with the secretary of state, Truman “decided to move at once and give American recognition to the new nation.”¹¹³

David Niles was already working behind the scenes to prepare Truman for his momentous decision. That morning, Niles phoned Eliahu Epstein, the Jewish Agency representative in Washington, to inform him that if the agency sent the president a formal request, the United States would recognize the new Jewish state at its establishment.¹¹⁴ Working on the phone with Clark Clifford, Epstein drafted the recognition request. The two men encountered a serious problem, however, when they realized that they did not know the name of the new state. Epstein settled for typing “the Jewish state” and continued the draft.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 1006.

¹¹⁰ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 21.

¹¹¹ Little, *American Orientalism*, 86.

¹¹² Quoted in Ibid.

¹¹³ Truman, *Memoirs*, 164.

¹¹⁴ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 218.

¹¹⁵ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 19.

The letter informed Truman that independence would become effective one minute after 6:00pm Washington time. The note ended, “with full knowledge of the deep bond of sympathy which has existed and has been strengthened over the past thirty years between the Government of the United states and the Jewish people of Palestine, I have been authorized by the provisional government of the new state to tender this message and to express the hope that your government will recognize and will welcome [the Jewish state] into the community of nations.”¹¹⁶

When he finished the official request for recognition, Epstein entrusted it to an aide, Harry Zinder, and sent him to deliver it to Clifford’s office. As the courier traveled by taxi from the Jewish Agency office to the White House, Ben Gurion’s announcement came over the radio that the Jewish state would be called Israel. Epstein frantically sent a second aide after Zinder to amend the letter. The woman clerk caught Zinder at the White House gates. Sitting in her car, Zinder crossed out the words “Jewish State” and inserted “Israel.” This was the first time anyone at the White House had heard the name of the new state.¹¹⁷

With Epstein’s request on hand, at 6:11pm Washington time, 12:11am Palestine time, President Truman officially recognized the State of Israel, only ten minutes after it came into existence. The president issued the following statement, drafted with assistance from David Niles: “This government has been informed that a Jewish state has been proclaimed in Palestine, and recognition has been requested by the provisional government thereof. The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de

¹¹⁶ Merrill, *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*, 141.

¹¹⁷ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 20 and Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 218.

facto authority of the new State of Israel.”¹¹⁸ Truman then immediately telephoned Niles. He said, “Dave, I want you to know that I just announced recognition. You are the first person I called because I knew how much this would mean to you.”¹¹⁹

For David Niles and the Zionist movement, Truman’s decision to promptly recognize Israel was an historic achievement against overwhelming odds. Truman’s decision was founded on a complex array of considerations – the practical reality of a Jewish state in Palestine, the desire to get an edge on the Kremlin in the Cold War, and Truman’s previous commitments to partition. But the critical factor in the recognition of Israel was the influence of David Niles. Interceding at crucial moments in the battle over Palestine between the State Department and the White House, Niles persuaded Truman of the gravity of the Jewish state question, and his own historic role in it. The private advice of the special assistant helped to make Truman, despite all the advice against it, a firm supporter of the State of Israel. To the anger and astonishment of the entire foreign policy elite, the Truman-Niles partnership succeeded in making the United States the first to recognize Israel as a sovereign, independent Jewish nation after two thousand years of exile.

Conclusion

Recognizing Israel made Harry Truman a hero to the new nation and to world Jewry. Letters poured into the White House thanking him for giving the State of Israel the international legitimacy it desperately needed and for bringing the British Mandate in Palestine to an end. In warm gratitude for “sign[ing] the birth certificate of the State of

¹¹⁸ Statement by the President, George M. Elsey Papers, Subject File: 1945-1949, Box 60, HSTL.

¹¹⁹ Sachar, “David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine,” 1.

Israel,” the Israelis named a village after the president – “Kfar Truman.”¹²⁰ Truman was “touched and grateful...and a little bit overwhelmed”¹²¹ at their gesture. Truman wept when the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Isaac Halevi Herzog, told him, “God put you in your mother’s womb so you would be the instrument to bring about Israel’s rebirth after two thousand years.”¹²²

Israelis and American Zionists also expressed their gratitude to David Niles for the role he played in 1948. Harry Levine, the president of the U.S. Plastic and Chemical Company who had been intensely involved in the establishment of the State of Israel, wrote to Niles on May 18 saying, “I cannot miss this opportunity to extend my congratulations to you because I know how much effort you put into the dream that has now become a reality.... The Jewish Community will always remember this historic event.”¹²³ Edmund Kaufman, former president of the Zionist Organization of America, thanked Niles for his “courageous and forthright position in bringing Partition about and [Truman’s] recognition of the New State.... In our darkest moments you...said on numerous occasions that, ‘The Chief will do the right thing.’”¹²⁴

Massachusetts Rabbi Joseph S. Shubow wrote to Niles to thank him for his help regarding “the Jewish State and President Truman’s generous gesture of immediately recognition of Israel.... You [are] a dedicated American and faithful Jew to whom we are all deeply indebted.” Eddie Jacobson praised the special assistant in a letter to Josef Cohn of the Industrial Institute of Israel in which he described David Niles’ participation in the

¹²⁰ *Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Quoted in D.M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore, *Dear Harry...Truman’s Mailroom: 1945-1953* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1999), 151.

¹²³ Levine to Niles, May 18, 1948, David K. Niles Papers, Israel File: 1940-1945 to June-July 1948, Box 29, HSTL.

¹²⁴ Kaufmann to Niles, May 26, 1948, Harry S. Truman Papers, Official File: 1945-1948, Box 1372, HSTL.

events of 1948. Jacobson wrote, “in almost every trip I made to Washington, I contacted Dave before I had a conference with the President. He kept me well posted on everything that happened, and gave me information that was very valuable in my discussions.”¹²⁵

The most noteworthy letter came from Chaim Weizmann, the first president of the State of Israel. Weizmann wrote, “Need I tell you of my profound appreciation? We are living in great days; it is perhaps too soon to evaluate their meaning for history. For many years now you have played no insignificant part in the making of this history, and I feel certain that when you look back upon these years you will have good reason to be proud and satisfied that is had been given to you to help bring about a proper understanding of the ideals of our cause in high places in Washington.”¹²⁶

Niles did have good reason to be proud and satisfied for he had helped the United States foster one of the greatest achievements for the Jews in history. President Truman’s recognition of Israel was a colossal event in the direction of American foreign policy, in the geopolitics of the Middle East, and in Jewish yearnings for self-determination. Truman’s emergence from a rural Missourian born into a racist, anti-Semitic household, into a great champion of Zionism was as extraordinary as it was improbable. Truman’s advisors, the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the British all opposed American support for Israel. They warned that the establishment of a Jewish state would involve the United States in a civil war in Palestine, alienate Arab nations whose resources were vital to American interests, and allow the Soviets a decisive victory in the Cold War by penetrating deeper into the region. But as president of the United States and thus the principal foreign policymaker, Truman decided to do what was right, as he saw

¹²⁵ Jacobson to Cohn, April 15, 1952, Weizmann Archive Records: 1945-1952, Box 1, HSTL.

¹²⁶ Weizmann to Niles, February 20, 1949, David K. Niles Papers, General File, Box 33, HSTL.

it, even if it challenged the so-called “experts” in the administration. The momentous decision to recognize Israel - against the experts - was the high water mark of the moral courage and leadership that is the legacy of Harry Truman.

Truman, however, could not have made such a decision alone. David Niles played a monumental role in shaping Truman’s foreign policy and making the case for Israel. On numerous occasions Niles intervened with the president to counter the anti-Zionist arguments put forth by the State Department. Niles spoke out directly against the policy recommendations of Truman’s Middle East “experts” and indirectly, by pushing for the appointment of Zionists to key advisory roles on Palestine. As a liaison to minority groups, Niles also guaranteed that a myriad of leading moderate Zionists deluged the president with petitions for a Jewish state.

Niles’ extraordinary influence arose out of his special relationship with Truman. In the middle of conflicting pressures – the diametrically opposed positions of American Zionists and the State Department, the rivalries between cabinet secretaries and White House advisors – Niles’ trusted private counsel served as respite for Truman from the internal and external pressures of the Palestine question. Trusted by the president for his moral convictions, modesty, and intelligence, Niles was able to overcome his rivals at the State Department and Pentagon even though he suffered from significant disadvantages in bureaucratic resources, political leverage, and expertise. In their private meetings and correspondence away the pressures of the crisis in Palestine, Truman came to favor the policy recommendations of Niles, an advisor with little clout and authority, over the views of the most venerable experts and revered people in the administration. One of the

greatest and least known stories in the creation of Israel is the role David Niles played behind the scenes that made possible American recognition in 1948.

Niles' legacy went far beyond the Palestine debate. After the United States recognized Israel, it became clear that the Middle East "experts" had been wrong on almost every count. Israel emerged as a crucial democratic ally of the United States in the Middle East. The Arabs were not driven into the hands of the Soviets. Israel did not become a Soviet outpost. Arab states vital to American interests (including Saudi Arabia) did not turn against the United States. The Jews overcame their alleged military disadvantages and won their war of independence without outside intervention.¹²⁷

The special relationship between the United States and Israel over the past sixty-three years owes a great deal to the special relationship between Harry Truman and David Niles. Niles once remarked that had Truman not been president of the United States, there would not have been an Israel.¹²⁸ The same could be said of Niles. The "\$64 dollar question" might have been answered entirely differently had it not been for the Truman-Niles partnership.¹²⁹ Truman became the father of the Jewish state, but it was David Niles who was Israel's midwife.

¹²⁷ Mitchell Bard, *The Arab Lobby: The Invisible Alliance that Undermines America's Interests in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 35.

¹²⁸ Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Devine, *Harry S. Truman, The State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, xv.

ABBREVIATIONS

AACI	Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry
AZEC	American Zionist Emergency Council
HSTL	Harry S. Truman Library
NEA	State Department Near East Affairs Bureau
PSF	President's Secretary's Files
UN	United Nations
UNSCOP	United Nations Special Committee on Palestine

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archival and Unpublished Materials

Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman. Videocassette. Episode 6: "At War with the Experts." 1964. Motion Picture Archives. HSTL.

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. Independence, Missouri.
 Confidential File
 David K. Niles Papers
 George M. Elsey Papers
 Oral History Interviews
 President's Personal File
 President's Secretary's Files
 Samuel I. Rosenmann Papers

Published Materials

Clifford, Clark M. "Recognizing Israel: 1948 Story." American Heritage. April 1977: 4-11.

——— and Richard Holbrooke. Counsel to the President: A Memoir. New York: Random House, 1991.

Crum, Bartley C. Behind the Silken Curtain: A Personal Account of Anglo-American Diplomacy in Palestine and the Middle East. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947.

Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945-1948.

Department of State Bulletin, 1948.

Ferrell, Robert H., ed., Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

Giangreco, D.M. and Kathryn Moore. Dear Harry... Truman's Mailroom: 1945-1953. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1999.

Goldmann, Nahum. Sixty Years of Jewish Life: The Autobiography of Nahum Goldmann. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969.

Merrill, Dennis, Editor. Documentary History of the Truman Presidency, Vol. 24. "The United States' Recognition of Israel." University Publications of America, 1998.

Miller, Merle. Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman. New York: Berkeley Publishing Company, 1973.

Millis, Walter, ed., The Forrestal Diaries. New York: The Viking Press, 1951.

The New York Times, 1945-1948.

Public Papers of the President, Harry S. Truman. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945-1948.

Roosevelt, Kermit. "The Partition of Palestine: A Lesson in Pressure Politics." The Middle East Journal 2 (January 1948): 1-16.

Steinberg, Alfred. "Mr. Truman's Mystery Man." Saturday Evening Post. December 24, 1949.

Time Magazine, 1945-1948.

Truman, Harry S. Memoirs Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1956.

Truman, Margaret. Harry S. Truman. New York: William Morroy & Company, 1973.

Wallace, Henry A. The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace, 1942-1946. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Acacia, John. Clark Clifford: The Wise Man of Washington. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009.

Bain, Kenneth. The March To Zion: United States Policy and the Founding of Israel. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1979.

Bard, Mitchell. The Arab Lobby: The Invisible Alliance that Undermines America's Interests in the Middle East. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

Bass, Warren. Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Benson, Michael T. Harry Truman and the Founding of Israel. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997.

- Berger, Alan L. "Harry S. Truman and Jewish Refugees." In Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman, edited by Michael J. Devine, Robert P. Watson, and Robert J. Wolz. Kirksville: Truman State University, 2008.
- Bickerton, Ian J. "President Truman's Recognition of Israel." American Jewish Historical Quarterly 63 (December 1968). 173-240.
- Cohen, Michael J. Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945-1948. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- . Truman and Israel. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Dallek, Robert. Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Daniels, Jonathan. The Man of Independence. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1950.
- De Vries, George, Jr. "Truman and the Recognition of Israel." In Harry S. Truman: The Man From Independence, edited by William F. Levantrosser. New York: Greenwood Pres, 1986.
- Donovan, Robert J. Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Druks, Herbert. "Truman and the Recognition of Israel Reconsidered." In Harry S. Truman: The Man From Independence, edited by William F. Levantrosser. New York: Greenwood Pres, 1986.
- . The Uncertain Friendship: The U.S. and Israel from Roosevelt to Kennedy. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Eban, Abba Solomon. "Israel and America: A Tribute to President Truman." Address before the Kfar Truman Dinner. Washington, D.C.: Embassy of Israel, May 26, 1952.
- Elath, Eliahu. "Harry S. Truman – The Man and Statesman," First Annual Harry S. Truman Lecture. Hebrew University of Jerusalem: The Harry S. Truman Research Institute, May 18, 1977.
- Evensen, Bruce J. "A Story of 'Ineptness': The Truman Administration's Struggle to Shape Conventional Wisdom on Palestine at the Beginning of the Cold War." Diplomatic History 15 (Summer 1991): 339-359.

- Friesel, Evyatar. "Toward the Partition of Palestine: The Goldmann Mission in Washington, August 1946." In Nahum Goldmann: Statesman Without a State, edited by Mark A. Raider. New York: SUNY Press, 2009.
- Ganin, Zvi. Truman, American Jewry, and Israel, 1945-1948. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979.
- . "The Limits of American Jewish Political Power: America's Retreat from Partition, November 1947-March 1948." Jewish Social Studies 39 (Winter-Spring 1977): 1-36.
- Gosnell, Harold F. Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980.
- Grose, Peter. "The President versus the Diplomats." In The End of the Palestine Mandate, edited by William Roger Louis and Robert Sookey, 32-60. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- . Israel in the Mind of America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.
- Halperin, Samuel and Oder, Irvin. "The United States in Search of a Policy: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Palestine." The Review of Politics 24 (July 1962): 320-341.
- Hamby, Alonzo L. Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . "An American Democrat: A Reevaluation of the Personality of Harry S. Truman." Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 106, No. 1 (Spring 1991): 33-51.
- Honig, Arthur. "The Whisper in the Leader's Ear: How Do Foreign Policy Advisers Perform their Job?" International Relations 22 (June 2008): 221-241.
- Horowitz, David. State in the Making. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.
- Israel and the United Nations. National Studies on International Organization. New York: Manhattan Publishing Company, 1956.
- Judis, John. "The \$64 Question." In Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman, edited by Michael J. Devine, Robert P. Watson, and Robert J. Wolz. Kirksville: Truman State University, 2008. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2008.
- Kaplan, Robert D. The Arabists: The Romance of an American Elite. New York: The Free Press, 1995.
- Kenen, I.L. Israel's Defense Line: Her Friends and Foes in Washington. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981.

- Khouri, Fred J. The Arab-Israeli Dilemma, 2nd ed. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982.
- Little, Douglas. American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Manuel, Frank Edward. The Realities of American-Palestine Relations. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Pres, 1949.
- McCullough, David. Truman. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.
- Miller, Rory. "More Sinned Against than Sinning? The Case of the Arab Office, Washington, 1945-1948," Diplomacy and Statecraft 15 (June 2004): 303-325.
- Offner, Arnold A. Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Oren, Michael B. Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- Parzen, Herbert. "President Truman and the Palestine Quandary: His Initial Experience, April-December 1945." Jewish Social Studies 35 (January 1973). 42-72.
- Radosh, Ronald and Radosh, Allis. A Safe Haven: Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009.
- . "Righteous among the Editors: When the Left Loved Israel," World Affairs 171 (Summer 2008): 65-75.
- . "Truman, Jews, and Zionsts." In Harry S. Truman, The State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East, edited by Michael J. Devine. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2009.
- Sachar, David B. "David K. Niles and United States Policy Toward Palestine: A Case Study in American Foreign Policy." Unpublished Undergraduate Honors Thesis, 1959.
- Sachar, Howard M. A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, 3rd ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.
- . Europe Leaves the Middle East: 1936-1954. New York: Herzl Press, 1972.
- Schechtman, Joseph B. The United States and the Jewish State Movement: The Crucial Debate, 1939-1949. New York: Herzl Press, 1966.

- Schmitz, David F. Thank God They're On Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Shafir, Shlomo. "Taylor and McDonald: Two Diverging Views on Zionism and the Emerging Jewish State." Jewish Social Studies 39 (Autumn 1977). 323-346.
- Slay, Terry Alan. "Harry S. Truman, David K. Niles, and the Creation of Israel." Unpublished Master's Thesis. Kent State University, August 1994.
- Snetsinger, John. Truman, The Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974.
- Tschirgi, Dan. Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement with the Palestine Problem. New York: Praeger, 1983.
- Warshal, Bruce S. "Truman's 1947 'Anti-Semitic' Diary Entry." In Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman, edited by Michael J. Devine, Robert P. Watson, and Robert J. Wolz. Kirksville: Truman State University, 2008.
- Weisgal, Meyer Wolfe and Joel Carmichael. Chaim Weizmann: A Biography by Several Hands. New York: Atheneum, 1963.
- Weizmann, Vera and David Tutaev. The Impossible Takes Longer: The Memoirs of Vera Weizmann, Wife of Israel's First President. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Wilson, Evan M. A Calculated Risk: The U.S. Decision to Recognize Israel. Cincinnati: Clerisy Press, 2008.
- Wyman, David S. The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- . Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968.