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The Tony Judd—ADL Affair

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SPECIAL DOCUMENT FILE

THE TONY JUDT-ADL AFFAIR

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On the heels of the Walt-Mersheimer controversy (see Special Document File in JPS 139), another case involving the Israel lobby reignited the debate on academic freedom and dissent where Israel is concerned. On 3 October, a planned lecture entitled “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” by historian Tony Judt, which was to be held at the Polish consulate of New York under the sponsorship of an outside organization called Network 20/20, was abruptly cancelled at the last minute by the Consul General. Reports immediately circulated that the cancellation was the result of pressures from several Jewish organizations, notably the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the American Jewish Committee; an article about the cancellation the following day in the New York Sun quoted Patricia Huntington, the president of Network 20/20, as saying that the Anti-Defamation League had “forced,” “threatened,” and exerted “pressure” on the Polish consulate to cancel the talk. (A follow-up article in the New York Sun on 5 October reported that Judt had withdrawn from a scheduled 17 October event at the Holocaust Resource Center of Manhattan College after the college, in response to a threatened picket by local rabbis, promised that Judt would speak only about the legacy of the Holocaust and would refrain from criticizing Israel.) The week before the planned lecture at the Polish consulate, on 28 September, he took part in a public debate at New York’s Cooper Union on the Israel lobby controversy inspired by the Walt-Mersheimer article. Professor Judt has been outspoken in his criticism of Israel but denies being “anti-Israel.”

Though several Jewish organizations were said to have contacted the Polish consulate (a 20 October article in the Jewish Week quotes the consul general himself

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as saying he acted “after receiving calls that day from ‘maybe four’ organizations and also individuals expressing concern about Judt’s appearance—among them the ADL and the American Jewish Committee”), it was the ADL that received the most attention, and much of the press coverage of the incident and its aftermath focused on whether or not—or to what extent—the ADL had pressured the Polish consul. Within days of the cancellation, an e-circulated petition in support of Professor Judt addressed to ADL National Director Abraham Foxman was organized by Mark Lilla of the University of Chicago and Richard Sennett of the London School of Economics and New York University. The protest, signed by 113 prominent intellectuals on 13 October, circulated widely but was not published until early November in the New York Review of Books.

A. MICHAEL POWELL, “POLISH CONSULATE SAYS JEWISH GROUPS CALLED TO OPPOSE HISTORIAN,” *WASHINGTON POST*, 9 OCTOBER 2006.

The article, published under the headline “In N.Y., Sparks Fly over Israel Criticism,” provides an overview of the case.

Two major American Jewish organizations helped block a prominent New York University historian from speaking at the Polish consulate here last week, saying the academic was too critical of Israel and American Jewry.

The historian, Tony Judt, is Jewish and directs New York University’s Remarque Institute, which promotes the study of Europe. Judt was scheduled to talk Oct. 4 [*sic*; the actual date was 3 October—Ed.] to a nonprofit organization that rents space from the consulate. Judt’s subject was the Israel lobby in the United States, and he planned to argue that this lobby has often stifled honest debate.

An hour before Judt was to arrive, the Polish Consul General Krzysztof Kasprzyk canceled the talk. He said the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee had called and he quickly concluded Judt was too controversial.

“The phone calls were very elegant but may be interpreted as exercising a delicate pressure,” Kasprzyk said. “That’s obvious—we are adults and our IQs are high enough to understand that.”

Judt, who was born and raised in England and lost much of his family in the Holocaust, took strong exception to the cancellation of his speech. He noted that he was forced to cancel another speech later this month at Manhattan College in the Bronx after a different Jewish group had complained. Other prominent academics have described encountering such problems, in some cases more severe, stretching over the past three decades.

The pattern, Judt says, is unmistakable and chilling.

“This is serious and frightening, and only in America—not in Israel—is this a problem,” he said. “These are Jewish organizations that believe they should keep people who disagree with them on the Middle East away from anyone who might listen.”

The leaders of the Jewish organizations denied asking the consulate to block Judt’s speech and accused the professor of retailing “wild conspiracy theories” about their roles. But they applauded the consulate for rescinding Judt’s invitation.

"I think they made the right decision," said Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "He's taken the position that Israel shouldn't exist. That puts him on our radar."

David A. Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, took a similar view. "I never asked for a particular action; I was calling as a friend of Poland," Harris said. "The message of that evening was going to be entirely contrary to the entire spirit of Polish foreign policy."

Judt has crossed rhetorical swords with the Jewish organizations on two key issues. Over the past few years he has written essays in the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* arguing that power in Israel has shifted to religious fundamentalists and territorial zealots, that woven into Zionism is a view of the Arab as the irreconcilable enemy, and that Israel might not survive as a communal Jewish state.

The solution, he argues, lies in a slow and tortuous walk toward a binational and secular state.

He has, of late, defended an academic paper—co-authored by professor Stephen M. Walt of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and John J. Mearsheimer, a professor at the University of Chicago—which argues the American Israel lobby has pushed policies that are not in the United States' best interests and in fact often encourage Israel to engage in self-destructive behavior.

These are deeply controversial views—Foxman of the ADL and writer Christopher Hitchens, among others, have attacked the Walt and Mearsheimer paper as anti-Semitic. And Judt's advocacy of a binational state has drawn a flock of critics, the more angry of whom accuse him of "pandering to genocide" as the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America put it. Former Bush speechwriter David Frum said Judt was pursuing "genocide liberalism."

Foxman has referred to Judt's views of Israel as "an offensive caricature."

The Mearsheimer and Walt paper, however, has drawn praise in some quarters in Israel, particularly on the left. So, too, some Israeli writers, not least Israeli historian and social critic Amos Elon, have praised Judt's writings on Israel. Nor are Judt's arguments without historical precedent: Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist and political philosopher Noam Chomsky, who is Jewish, has advocated a binational solution in Israel, a view that three decades ago sparked such anger that police stood guard at his college talks. More recently, the ADL repeatedly accused DePaul University professor Norman G. Finkelstein, who is Jewish and strongly opposes Israeli policies, of being a "Holocaust denier." These charges have proved baseless.

"There is an often organized and often spontaneous attempt to marginalize anyone in the Jewish world who offers a critique of Israeli policy," said Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of the liberal magazine *Tikkun*. "It's equated with anti-Semitism and Israel denial."

Foxman says such complaints are silly. "Nobody has called Judt an anti-Semite," Foxman said. "People who are critical of Israel and of the Jewish people often flaunt their Jewishness. Why isn't that an issue?"

Judt replies that he only reluctantly talks of his Jewishness, in no small part to inoculate himself against charges of anti-Semitism. "For many, the way to be Jewish in this country is to aggressively assert that the Holocaust is your identification tag," Judt said.

"I know perfectly well my history, but it never occurred to me that my most prominent identity was as a Jew."

B. LARRY COHLER-ESSES, "OFF LIMITS? TALK BY ISRAEL CRITIC CANCELLED," *JEWISH WEEK, NEW YORK*, 6 OCTOBER 2006 (EXCERPTS).

The following excerpts of the article, subtitled "Latest in a String of Cases Involves NYU's Controversial Tony Judt," summarize recent cases seen as examples of the power of pro-Israel groups.

The episode [the cancellation of Judt's talk at the Polish consulate] took its place on a growing list of hotly disputed allegations that pro-Israel advocates use their influence to stifle debate, or harm the careers of individuals who step out of bounds. The last two years have seen such charges made by Joseph Massad, an untenured Columbia University professor of Middle East studies accused by some students of bigoted outbursts toward Jewish and Israeli students. A university investigation largely, though not entirely, exonerated him of the charges.

Pro-Israel advocates also claimed their lobbying of Yale University donors succeeded in preventing Juan Cole, a University of Michigan Middle Eastern studies professor, from receiving a tenured appointment at Yale earlier this year. University officials denied they played a role.

Also this year, acclaimed British architect Richard Rogers was threatened with the loss of billions of dollars in commissioned design work from New York City until he renounced ties to an architects' group strongly critical of Israel. The group was threatening to call for an economic boycott of Israel to protest its occupation of the West Bank.

Yet another flap involved the cancellation of an award-winning play in New York about Rachel Corrie, a young college graduate from Washington State who went to Gaza with a solidarity group to protest the occupation. Corrie was run over and killed there by an Israeli bulldozer demolishing a Palestinian home.

The play, scheduled to open last spring at the New York Theatre Workshop, was canceled, with the Workshop's artistic director citing pressure from unnamed Jewish leaders. The play is set to reopen at the Minetta Lane Theatre this month.

In Judt's case, his cancellation hung in the air as an uncertain coda five days after he took part in a landmark panel discussion on the influence of the Israel lobby. The event, sponsored by the *London Review of Books*, featured John Mearsheimer, the University of Chicago international relations professor who co-authored a hugely controversial paper on the subject published by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government last spring.

Mearsheimer's paper argues, among other things, that "The Lobby," as Mearsheimer calls it, drives U.S. Middle East policy in directions contrary to the national interest; that it was a crucial factor in pushing the United States into war with Iraq; and that it stifles debate about Israel at home.

The ADL and others have denounced the paper as anti-Semitic for the broad sweep of its thesis: that a sprawling, loosely coordinated yet nevertheless monolithic pro-Israel movement is undermining the nation's interests out of its attachment to Israel.

At last week's event, held at Cooper Union, Judt joined Columbia University Professor Rashid Khalidi in basic support of Mearsheimer's thesis. Arguing vigorously against the thesis were former senior Middle East peace process negotiators Dennis Ross, who is now associated with the pro-Israel Washington Institute on Near East Policy, and Martin Indyk, who worked for AIPAC and WINEP before he became U.S. ambassador to Israel. They were joined by former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami.

It was a singular, even exhausting night of untrammelled argument about Israel and its lobby among individuals with deep backgrounds and strong views before an audience of some 2,000—but no mainstream media coverage. And one of the primary points debated was whether the Israel lobby, through its influence over government, politics and public discourse, suppresses debate about Israel, and about its own activities.

Now, according to Judt, the point was illustrating itself. Foxman and Kasprzyk dismissed Judt's allegations, offering a starkly different account.

C. MARK LILLA, RICHARD SENNETT, AND OTHER PROMINENT INTELLECTUALS, OPEN LETTER TO THE ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE CONCERNING THE CANCELLATION OF PROFESSOR TONY JUDT'S SCHEDULED LECTURE, 13 OCTOBER 2006.

The protest letter was published in the 16 November 2006 edition of the New York Review of Books under the title "The Case of Tony Judt: An Open Letter to the ADL," with an introduction by the two professors who organized the petition, Mark Lilla of University of Chicago and Richard Sennett of the London School of Economics and New York University. Much of the introduction, which is not reproduced here, was taken up with refuting the subsequent retraction by Patricia Huntington, director of the nonprofit that had organized the cancelled event, of her early statements to the press regarding the ADL pressures. To this end, the authors provide lengthy quotes from Huntington confirming these statements in e-mails she had sent them while they were composing the letter. (In a 6 October e-mail, for example, Ms. Huntington explains the Polish consulate's denial of her report of ADL pressures as follows: "[The denial] is not surprising. They have to. But our lawyers caution Network 20/20 from possibly fueling an unnecessary conflict with the Polish Consulate by repeating what is already clearly stated in the NY Sun. I was clear in that article.")

The letter was signed by 113 prominent intellectuals, a number of whom (including Leon Wieseltier, Franklin Foer, Andrew Sullivan, and others associated with the hawkish and pro-Israel New Republic) strongly disagree with Professor Judt's views, but signed the letter on freedom of speech grounds. Footnotes in the letter have been eliminated for reasons of space, but the letter and full list of signatories is available at www.nybooks.com.

Dear Mr. Foxman:

As you know, on October 3, Professor Tony Judt of New York University was scheduled to give a lecture titled "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" before a public audience, at the invitation of Network 20/20, which sponsors many forums in New York City. The lecture, like many others presented by this organization, was to be held at the Polish Consulate of New York, which rented its facilities but in no way sponsored

the event. Shortly before the lecture was scheduled to begin, however, it was abruptly cancelled by Consul General Krzysztof Kasprzyk, who later told a reporter, "I don't have to subscribe to the First Amendment." Patricia Huntington, director of Network 20/20, informs us that when she received a telephone call canceling the event, scheduled to place within the hour, she was told that ADL President Abe Foxman was on the other line to the Consul General.

Ms. Huntington has now accused the Anti-Defamation League of having "forced," "threatened," and exerted "pressure" on the consulate to cancel the talk. Although the deputy counsel general has disputed this claim, he did tell the *New York Sun* that the consulate received calls from "a couple of Jewish groups" as well as "representatives of American diplomacy and intelligentsia" expressing "concerns" over the lecture. In the event, the lecture was cancelled, a move then welcomed by David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, who remarked, "Bravo to them for doing the right thing."

These facts argue against the press release the ADL circulated on October 5, 2006, disclaiming any role in the cancellation of Professor Judt's lecture. The ADL has recently been very critical of those academics and intellectuals, like Professor Judt, who have raised questions about the Israel lobby and American foreign policy, an issue on which reasonable people have disagreed. This does not surprise us or disturb us. What does surprise and disturb us is that an organization dedicated to promoting civil rights and public education should threaten and exert pressure to cancel a lecture by an important scholar, as Ms. Huntington says happened.

In a democracy, there is only one appropriate response to a lecture, article, or book one does not agree with. It is to give another lecture, write another article, or publish another book. For much of its hundred-year history your organization worked side by side with other Americans who wanted to guarantee that freedom for all, and your mission statement still declares: "the goal remains the same: to stand up for the core values of America against those who seek to undermine them through word or deed."

Though we, the undersigned, have many disagreements about political matters, foreign and domestic, we are united in believing that a climate of intimidation is inconsistent with fundamental principles of debate in a democracy. The Polish Consulate is not obliged to promote free speech. But the rules of the game in America oblige citizens to encourage rather than stifle public debate. We who have signed this letter are dismayed that the ADL did not choose to play a more constructive role in promoting liberty.

D. ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE NATIONAL DIRECTOR ABRAHAM FOXMAN, STATEMENT CONCERNING THE JUDT CASE, NEW YORK, 17 OCTOBER 2006.

After receiving the letter organized by Lilla and Sennet, ADL National Director Foxman offered to meet with the group to discuss the accusations. Instead, they suggested that he send his response to the New York Review of Books, which would be publishing the petition in its coming issue. Mr. Foxman's response was duly published in the NYRB's 30 November edition under the heading: "The ADL and Tony Judt: An Exchange."

On October 13, we received a letter from Mark Lilla of the University of Chicago and Richard Sennett of the London School of Economics accusing ADL and me of violating democratic principles of debate by threatening and pressing the Polish consulate general to cancel a speech by Tony Judt. More than one hundred other academics, journalists, and others signed on to the letter from Professors Lilla and Sennett.

What is so shocking about this letter is that a group claiming to be defending fundamental values of free expression in a democratic society—values that ADL has worked to ensure for decades—employs techniques which completely debase those values.

Neither the principal authors of the letter nor any of the co-signatories ever sought me out to get the perspective of ADL as to what did and did not happen. Professors Lilla and Sennett simply credit as “fact” the comments and opinions of the president of the group that sponsored the event and leap to the unsupported conclusion that “These facts argue against the press release the ADL circulated . . . disclaiming any role in the cancellation of Professor Judt’s lecture”; they have acted as judge and jury without engaging in the least bit of due diligence to ascertain whether there are facts they do not know; and they use inflammatory words like “threaten,” “pressure,” and “intimidate” that bear no resemblance to what actually transpired.

ADL did not threaten or intimidate or pressure anyone. The Polish consul general made his decision concerning Tony Judt’s appearance strictly on his own.

ADL is justifiably proud of its ninety-three-year record of defending free speech as a bedrock principle of a healthy society. It is disheartening to see leading scholars ignore the very doctrine they invoke by rushing to judgment against our organization. Their behavior is a much subtler and more dangerous form of intimidation than the baseless accusations conjured up against ADL. Now, by raising the specter of “threat and intimidation,” Professors Lilla and Sennett want ADL to fall into line and behave as though “the rules of the game in America . . .” do not also oblige them “to encourage rather than stifle public debate.”

When teachers speak out on the rules governing “fundamental principles of debate in a democracy,” particularly scholars of the stature of Professors Lilla and Sennett, they have a responsibility to the academy, their students, and society to do so with the highest degree of respect for those principles. Sadly, Professors Lilla and Sennett appear to have lost sight of this responsibility.

E. PROFESSORS MARK LILLA AND RICHARD SENNETT, REPLY TO ABRAHAM FOXMAN.

The New York Review of Books published the following response together with Mr. Foxman’s letter in its 30 November 2006 edition. Footnotes have been omitted for reasons of space, but the letter is available at www.nybooks.com.

While we are grateful for Mr. Foxman’s response, we are also puzzled by it since he does not address the main contentions of our letter.

The issue is not, as Mr. Foxman would have us believe, whether the Polish consul general, Krzysztof Kasprzyk, made his decision “strictly on his own.” It is whether the ADL did indeed “threaten,” “intimidate,” and “pressure” him into making a decision by calling so shortly before Professor Judt’s lecture was scheduled to take place. Since our

letter was circulated, Mr. Kasprzyk has confirmed just that, telling the *Washington Post* that “the phone calls were very elegant but may be interpreted as exercising a delicate pressure. That’s obvious—we are adults and our IQs are high enough to understand that.” He then told Larry Cohler-Esses of the *Jewish Week*, whose reporting on this matter has been invaluable, that “when you look at it from the outside, a call like this [from Jewish organizations], just asking about this on the very day of the event can be seen as exercising a very—I don’t know if this is the word—a delicate pressure.”

Yes, Mr. Kasprzyk, it is the right word. The *Post* article is also important because it reveals that the ADL was not the only organization to call the consul general, though we did not know this when we drafted our letter. David A. Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, told the *Post* that he also telephoned, though “as a friend of Poland.” “The message of that evening,” he is quoted as saying, “was going to be entirely contrary to the entire spirit of Polish foreign policy.” He said something similar to the *New York Observer* shortly thereafter, remarking that “I wanted to alert him because we’ve worked with Poland for a long time, and Poland has worked since 1989 to build a strong relationship with Israel after decades of poor relations under the Communist regime—and because I knew that Tony Judt was not a universally popular figure in the Jewish community. We had a nice conversation.”

Even without knowing the substance of those “nice” calls from the ADL and AJC, any impartial observer will recognize them as not so subtle forms of pressure. We are further convinced in this judgment by the fact that both organizations celebrated the consul general’s decision as soon as it was made. Mr. Harris told the *New York Sun*, “Bravo to them [the Poles] for doing the right thing,” and Mr. Foxman told the *Washington Post*, in the article already cited, “I think they made the right decision.”

Why Mr. Foxman offered us a “face to face” meeting to “put the facts on the table” is more puzzling still. What would he have said then that he could not have said in his press releases, interviews, and, now, his letter to the *New York Review*? If there have been any errors regarding fact, we would be happy to correct them. We can only conclude that, at some very basic level, Mr. Foxman does not “get it.” He does not seem to recognize that public debate and discussion is a healthy thing in a democracy, and that sound public policy in domestic and foreign affairs depends on it.

F. JEFFREY BLANKFORT, COMMUNICATION ON THE ADL’S RECORD IN DEFENSE OF CIVIL RIGHTS.

The following letter was sent to the “point person” who helped Lilla and Sennett organize the petition in solidarity with Judt. Jeffrey Blankfort, the former editor of the Middle East Labor Bulletin, has written widely and critically on the question of Zionism, Israel, and major U.S. Jewish organizations.

Dear Ms. McNamara,

I wish to correct the following misstatement in the otherwise excellent petition in behalf of Tony Judt: “Dr. Foxman is a Holocaust survivor who has in the past earned our respect by his contributions to the defense of civil rights in our nation.”

Foxman was born in Poland in 1940 and was saved by his Catholic “nanny” until being reunited with his parents in 1944 so his experience in Europe in the first four

years of his life should [be] irrelevant. His so-called "defense of civil rights" includes the exposure by the FBI and the San Francisco Police Dept, in 1992 and 1993, that the ADL was operating what was probably the largest spying operation against progressives of all varieties throughout the United States, with special emphasis on the Palestinian and Arab communities and their supporters and the Anti-Apartheid movement, including the monitoring of black South African exiles, with the information being turned over to South African intelligence by ADL's "main fact finder," Roy Bullock. This was consistent with ADL policy, since Foxman had publicly labeled the African National Congress as a "terrorist" organization. Israel and Apartheid South Africa were close allies at the time, and one of the ANC's sins was its support of the PLO.

During the witch hunts of the late 40s and 50s, the ADL closely cooperated with the House Committee on Un-American Activities, as a "clearance agent" for those willing to cooperate with the HUAC. In a House hearing in 1947, it was revealed that the ADL had been providing information on the National Lawyers Guild to the first HUAC, headed by the notorious anti-Semite, Martin Dies, going back to 1937.

Moreover, the ADL has led the fight against affirmative action from the beginning and has testified in every case where it has been challenged. This has not endeared it to the black community as a "civil rights" organization.

It is unfortunate that this otherwise fine petition is marred by an attempt to give the ADL and Foxman praise where none is due or required. This is not a minor matter, I assure you, and should be corrected.