

Rafael Medoff

Antisemitism in the White House

Executive Summary:

John F. Kennedy's father, Jimmy Carter's brother, and Harry Truman's wife and mother-in-law were all reliably reported to have expressed antisemitic sentiments. There is no evidence, however, that those presidential relatives had any influence on U.S. government policy. There is substantial evidence that both Truman and Richard Nixon made antisemitic remarks on multiple occasions while in office. Yet their policies regarding Israel do not seem to have been affected by their private sentiments about Jews. The case of President Franklin D. Roosevelt is different. Evidence has emerged in recent decades that FDR made at least eight separate disparaging remarks about Jewish influence or characteristics, as well as numerous jokes deprecating Jews. These statements dovetail with comments made by FDR in the 1920s about race and immigration, and help explain the extreme restrictions his administration imposed to keep Jewish refugee immigration far below the legal limits during the Holocaust years. In violation of accepted scholarly standards, some prominent historians have withheld documents that reveal antisemitic remarks by Truman or Roosevelt.¹

In modern day America, expressions of antisemitism are most often encountered in gritty urban settings and among the coarser elements of society. In past decades, it was not surprising for anti-Jewish prejudice to be expressed in more sophisticated settings, such as corporate board rooms, country clubs, restricted neighborhoods, and college admissions offices. But it was never publicly acceptable in government, local or national. Never in the White House. The concept of “to bigotry, no sanction; to persecution, no assistance” was first articulated by George Washington and thereupon firmly established by common consensus as one of the foundation stones of American society.

The principle of rejecting bigotry has been the social norm in the United States since the late 1960s (even if implementation at the grassroots level has not yet been fully

¹ This essay is scheduled to be published in the 2014 edition of the annual volume *Antisemitism in America*, edited by Prof. Eunice Pollack (Academic Studies Press).

achieved). Every president has pledged fealty to this standard. The possibility that a president, or someone very close to him, might secretly harbor antisemitic feelings, would strike at one of the nation's core ideals and, of course, potentially threaten the well-being of the American Jewish community. Hence the Jewish community's close scrutiny of every presidential candidate's personal background and circle of advisers, and the justified expressions of alarm if red flags appear. A candidate who openly espouses religious or racial prejudice would stand no chance of being elected. A candidate who failed to dismiss an openly bigoted senior staff member likely would fare no better. Yet when antisemitic sentiment is harbored privately by a president or those closest to him, dealing with it is a more complicated matter. Four 20th-century American presidents have had close relatives who were known to be antisemitic. Three presidents themselves have been reliably reported to have harbored antisemitic views. And in one instance, such prejudice appears to have played a significant role in shaping an important aspect of U.S. government policy.

I. KENNEDY'S FATHER

Reports about the antisemitic sentiments of Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of John F. Kennedy, first surfaced shortly after World War II, more than a decade after they were allegedly expressed. In 1949, German documents captured by the Allies quoted conversations in 1938 between Kennedy, who was then U.S. ambassador to England, and his German counterpart, Herbert von Dirksen. Kennedy was said to have spoken to von Dirksen of the "strong influence" of Jews on the American media, and expressed "understanding" for German policy toward Jews, mentioning the exclusion of Jews from country clubs in his native Boston. Because the source of the statements was a Nazi official, Joseph Kennedy was able to plausibly dismiss the report as "poppycock." The allegation was a case of a diplomat telling his superiors "what he thought they would like to hear about me," he insisted. Leaflets citing newspaper reports about the documents reportedly were distributed in Boston's heavily-Jewish 14th Ward during JFK's 1952 campaign for the U.S. Senate. Their impact appears to have been negligible.²

Reports of antisemitic remarks by the elder Kennedy multiplied in the years to follow. The diaries of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, published in 1954, included a July 1939 entry citing reports of Ambassador Kennedy telling friends in England that "the Jews were running the United States" and that U.S. government policy was "a Jewish

² "Captured German Documents Reveal Anti-Jewish Views of Former Ambassador Kennedy," Jewish Telegraphic Agency [hereafter JTA], 17 July 1949; "Ex-ambassador Kennedy Ridicules Nazi Diplomat's Report on His Views of Jews," JTA, 18 July 1949; Victor Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), pp.143-144.

production.” An early JFK biographer, Victor Lasky, reported in his 1963 book that Joseph Kennedy’s “occasional anti-Semitic outbursts were no secret.” Naomi W. Cohen, in her 1972 history of the American Jewish Committee, quoted Kennedy as privately accusing Jews of trying to push America into a conflict with Hitler and asserting (“on the authority of no less a person than Franklin Delano Roosevelt”) that “if the United States is dragged into war with Germany there might even be a pogrom in the U.S.A. itself.” The best that Hank Searls, a sympathetic Kennedy family historian, could muster in defense of the elder Kennedy was the fact that he was friendly with Jewish financier Bernard Baruch and Arthur Krock, a Jewish editor at the *New York Times*. Searls also quoted “an Irish Catholic squadron mate who knew [Joseph Kennedy] very well” as explaining: “He was just like me. He didn’t like kikes but some of his best friends were Jews.”³

Taken together, such statements add up to credible indications of antisemitism, but published separately over a number of years, as they were, Kennedy’s reported remarks attracted no serious public attention. In any event, all of them appeared long after they would have been relevant to any concerns about his influence on JFK as president.

II. CARTER’S BROTHER

By contrast, Billy Carter made a series of untoward remarks about Jews when his older brother, Jimmy Carter, was president. The controversy began in late 1978 at a public roast of Atlanta Braves pitcher Phil Niekro, at which Carter said he was unaware that Niekro, a Polish-American, was a “Pollack,” thinking that he was, in fact, a “bastardized Jew.” The comical nature of the event enabled White House aides to brush it off as a bad joke or, as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency charitably characterized it, an example of “Billy’s frequent habit of putting words before thought.” Soon, however, the younger Carter’s inappropriate remarks multiplied, and pressure increased on the president to respond. In January 1979, Billy brought a Libyan delegation to Georgia. The mayor of Atlanta declined to meet them; Billy claimed the mayor had succumbed to “the pressure of Jews.” The president’s brother also asserted that the “Jewish media [tore] up the Arab countries full-time,” and explained his decision to undertake a business

³ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes - Volume Two: The Inside Struggle, 1936-1939* (New York: 1954), p.676 - entry for 2 July 1939; Lasky, p.143; Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee 1906-1966* (Philadelphia: 1972), p.184; Hank Searls, *The Lost Prince: Young Joe, The Forgotten Kennedy* (New York: World Publishing, 1969), p.123.

relationship with the Qadaffi regime on the grounds that "there is a hell of a lot more Arabians than there is Jews."⁴

The repeated public controversies over Billy's remarks threatened to turn the matter into a political problem for the president. The previous year had been replete with tense moments between the Carter administration and the American Jewish community, as U.S. officials criticized Israeli counter-terror actions in southern Lebanon, announced new arms sales to Arab states, and blamed Israel for the faltering of Israeli-Egyptian peace talks. While nobody in the Jewish community suggested any connection between Billy Carter and U.S. Mideast policy, Billy's statements nonetheless added fuel to the fire and made it politically risky for the president to remain silent with regard to his brother's statements.⁵

Finally, in an interview with NBC-TV's John Chancellor, President Carter addressed the issue. He refrained from explicitly condemning Billy's statements or acknowledging that they were antisemitic. To do so, he said, would be "counterproductive," because "any criticism I might make publicly of Billy would cause, I think, him to react very strongly and to exert his independence." He said he hoped "the people of the United States realize I have no control" over his brother. But Billy soon forced his brother's hand. Asked by a reporter about American Jewish criticism of his previous remarks, Billy replied: "They can kiss my ass as far as I am concerned now." The president replied publicly, saying that he "disassociated" himself from Billy's comments, while at the same time insisting that Billy had "never made [any] serious critical remarks" about Jews, and "I know for a fact that he is not anti-Semitic." He emphasized that Billy was "seriously ill." The president's mother offered a similar defense; when asked about the matter, she replied: "Billy is friendly but he drinks too much."⁶

Billy Carter's reputation as a buffoonish alcoholic no doubt ameliorated the public's assessment of his antisemitism. Billy was widely perceived as a foul-mouthed drunk, not a source of serious political influence on the president. The family loyalty expressed both by the president for his brother, and the president's mother for her son, were widely understood as the appropriate extension of a helping hand to a wayward family member. Moreover, the references to Billy's illness (alcoholism) introduced

⁴ "Billy Carter Reprimanded for Use of Term 'bastardized Jew'," JTA, 26 December 1978.

⁵ Pranay Gupte, "Jewish Groups Charge Carter Has Abandoned Role of Mediator," *New York Times* (hereafter NYT), 17 December 1978.

⁶ "President Repudiates His Brother," JTA, 26 February 1979; "Billy Carter Hosts Libyan Delegation to Georgia, Takes a Slap at Jews," JTA, 11 January 1979; "ADL Urges President to Dissociate Himself from Brother's Remarks," JTA, 12 January 1979; "Furor over Billy Carter's Remarks," January 15, 1979;; "New Slur by Billy Carter," JTA, 16 February 1979; "Jimmy: Billy is Not Anti-Semitic but I Disassociate Myself from Billy," JTA, 28 February 1979; "Lillian Carter Visits Yad Vashem," JTA, 24 April 1980.

mitigating circumstances: they moved his statements into the category of utterances that were provoked, or at least substantially aggravated by, a medical condition, that is, beyond his control. As for the political impact of Billy's statements, they may have caused some damage to President Carter in the Jewish community, but ultimately it was Carter's policies toward Israel that were the central factor in undermining that relationship and causing some 60% of Jewish voters to support either Ronald Reagan or John Anderson, rather than Carter, in the 1980 presidential election.

III. TRUMAN'S MOTHER IN LAW

As was the case with Joseph Kennedy, the antisemitism of President Harry S. Truman's mother-in-law, Madge Gates Wallace, first was reported only after Truman's death. The source was Merle Miller's 1974 oral biography of Truman, *Plain Speaking*, which included an interview with Mrs. Bluma Jacobson, the widow of Truman's friend and one-time business partner, Eddie Jacobson. She said that during 1919-1934, when Harry and Bess Truman lived with Mrs. Wallace, the Jacobsons were never invited to the house, because "the Wallaces were aristocracy in these parts, and under the circumstances the Trumans couldn't afford to have Jews at their house." The television producer and talk show host David Susskind made the same point, based on his own experience, to former White House ghostwriter James Humes. It seems that in the late 1960s, Susskind was working with the former president on a documentary, and was puzzled by the fact that when he arrived at Truman's house each day, Mrs. Truman never invited him in, even in the cold of winter. The former president explained: "You're a Jew, David, and no Jew has ever been in the house." Susskind protested, "I am amazed that you who recognized Israel and championed the integration of the army would say such a thing!" Truman responded: "David, this is not the White House--it's the Wallace house. Bess runs it, and there's never been a Jew inside the house in her or her mother's lifetime." Humes published the Susskind-Truman exchange in his 1997 memoir.⁷

These episodes did not become a source of serious public interest. Part of the reason was timing: when the incidents became known, they already were old news. In addition, they were published 25 years apart, meaning that many people who heard about the second instance did not remember the first. Moreover, there were no other published reports about their alleged antisemitism, so even to those who were paying attention, it may have seemed that these were isolated incidents rather than

⁷ Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*, New York: G.P.: Putnam's Sons, 1974), pp.90-91; James Humes, *Confessions of a White House Ghostwriter* (Chicago: Regnery, 1997), p. 35.

representative of a broad attitude of hostility toward Jews. Most of all, President Truman has long enjoyed near-heroic status in the Jewish community because of his de facto recognition of the newborn State of Israel just minutes after its establishment. That sense of appreciation undoubtedly blunted the possibility of significant Jewish criticism of Truman's wife or mother-in-law.

IV. HARRY TRUMAN

The question of Truman and the Jews was complicated, however, by scholars' gradual discovery of multiple instances, both prior to and during his presidency, in which Truman himself made indisputably antisemitic remarks.

The first public allegation that Truman had made a bigoted comment about Jews actually arose while he was president. On March 10, 1948, syndicated columnist Drew Pearson, a highly regarded investigative journalist based in Washington, reported what he said were statements made in a recent conversation about Palestine between Truman and "a New York publisher." (He was referring to *New York Post* publisher Ted Thackery.) Pearson wrote: "Pounding his desk, [Truman] used words that can't be repeated about 'the (blank) New York Jews'. 'They're disloyal to their country. Disloyal!', he cried." Truman denounced the story as "a lie out of whole cloth." Pearson stood his ground. The controversy did not escalate, however. No additional evidence emerged at the time, thus effectively reducing the matter to a he said/she said dispute that could not be definitively proven or disproven. In any event, within days, the allegation was swamped by a much larger controversy over the announcement by the U.S. ambassador at the United Nations favoring an international trusteeship for Palestine instead of Jewish statehood. As a consequence, the Pearson allegation was quickly forgotten by the Jewish community, and has been overlooked by historians ever since.⁸

Several decades later, however, evidence emerged of a similar comment by Truman. The U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, George Wadsworth, visiting Washington in February 1948, reported to a colleague that Truman said to him that a British proposal (known as the Morrison-Grady plan) could have brought peace to the region, but "it had failed because of British bullheadedness and the fanaticism of our New York Jews." Truman also complained to Wadsworth that "the British were still being bullheaded and American Jews were still being fanatic about it." The Wadsworth memo was published

⁸ "Truman Says 'Lie;' Reporter Says 'No'; President Denies Remark on Jews, United Press dispatch in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 12 March 1948, p. 2; "Truman Denies Angrily Press Report That He Said New York Jews Were Disloyal to U.S.," JTA, 12 March 1948.

(in 1975) only in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, a series of U.S. government reference volumes that is consulted by scholars but seldom attracts public attention.⁹

Harsher expressions by Truman about Jews were revealed in the years to follow. A 1973 biography of the president by his daughter, Margaret, mentioned that Truman's mother once forwarded to him a note "from a Jewish friend of a friend" urging U.S. support of Jewish statehood. Truman's hostile response used an obvious code word for 'Jews': "These people are the usual European conspirators and they try to approach the President from every angle."¹⁰ Another troubling remark came to light that same year, in published excerpts from the diary of Henry Wallace. Wallace, who served as vice president in Franklin Roosevelt's third term and then in Truman's cabinet as secretary of agriculture, noted an abrasive comment made by Truman during a July 30, 1946 cabinet discussion. Referring to Jewish dissatisfaction over the aforementioned Morrison-Grady plan, Truman declared: "Jesus Christ couldn't please them when he was here on earth, so how could anyone expect that I would have any luck?" Along the same lines, a 1979 book by Israeli scholar Zvi Ganin reported that in a meeting with Zionist advocate James G. McDonald in 1946, Truman grouched: "Well, you can't satisfy these people....The Jews aren't going to write the history of the United States or my history." (A later study also quoted McDonald as remarking that in discussing Palestine with Truman, the president "referred only to the Jews generally and not to the Zionists. I don't think he distinguishes very much.")¹¹

With each new revelation, it became more difficult to chalk up such statements to the pressures of the frustrating Palestine situation, the president's well-known temper, or his straightforward style of speaking. The publication, in 1983, of Truman's letters to his wife, Bess, shed a whole new and unflattering light on his private prejudices. In addition to unfriendly remarks about African-Americans, Italian-Americans, and other minorities, *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959* revealed numerous antisemitic comments. In letters written while serving in the military in 1918, Truman characterized New York City as a "kike" town, referred to his success at turning a profit in running the Army canteen as his "Jewish ability," and described Eddie Jacobson, his new Jewish employee at the canteen, as his "Jew clerk." Some later letters also contained pejorative statements about Jews. In one 1935 letter, he reported to Bess

⁹ Wadsworth to Henderson, 4 February 1948, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948: The Near East, South Asia, and Africa - Volume V, Part 1* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 593. (Courtesy of Monty N. Penkower.)

¹⁰ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), p. 299.

¹¹ John Morton Blum, ed. *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace 1942-1946* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p.607; Zvi Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry, and Israel, 1945-1948* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), p.81; Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p.133.

that a participant in a poker game "screamed like a Jewish merchant."¹² Prof. Michael Cohen's book *Truman and Israel*, published in 1990, brought together the previously published antisemitic remarks and revealed another one: in a 1945 memo, President Truman wrote: "The Jews claim God Almighty picked 'em out for special privilege. Well I'm sure he had better judgement. Fact is I never thought God picked any favorites. It is my studied opinion that any race, creed or color can be God's favorites if they act the part--and very few of 'em do that."¹³

Nonetheless, the question of Truman's antisemitism did not stir significant public interest until 2003, when a staff member at the Truman presidential library in Missouri discovered a previously unknown diary of Truman's. In an entry dated July 21, 1947, Truman commented bitterly on a phone call he had received from Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., concerning the British decision to prevent the refugee ship *Exodus* from reaching Palestine. "He'd no business, whatever to call me," the president wrote. "The Jews have no sense of proportion nor do they have any judgement on world affairs...The Jews, I find are very, very selfish. They care not how many Estonians, Latvians, Finns, Poles, Yugoslavs or Greeks get murdered or mistreated as D[isplaced] P[ersons] as long as the Jews get special treatment. Yet when they have power, physical, financial or political neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the under dog."

Evidently, neither the comments recorded earlier in the Wallace diary, the Truman letters, nor the Cohen book had managed to seep into the wider public consciousness, because when the 1947 diary entry surfaced in 2003, it made front page news and was greeted by widespread shock, as if no similar evidence had preceded it. "Wow! It did surprise me because of what I know about Truman's record," Sara Bloomfield, director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, told the *Washington Post*. "Here was another hero who crumbled," commented Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Now we learn...that he, too, was capable of the most sordid antisemitic attitudes."¹⁴ The Jewish Telegraphic Agency compared the shock in the Jewish community over the Truman diary to children "coming to grips with the news that their parents aren't infallible." Prof. Deborah Dwork predicted that many Jews would be "upset to hear it because it's so much easier to hold

¹² Robert H. Ferrell, ed. *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), pp.242, 248, 254, 366.

¹³ Cohen, pp.7, 133.

¹⁴ "President Harry S. Truman's 1947 Diary Book, 1947 Diary and Manual of the Real Estate Board of New York, Inc.," Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/diary/transcript.htm>; Rebecca Dana and Peter Carlson, "Harry Truman's Forgotten Diary," *Washington Post*, 11 July 2003, p.1; "Release of Diary Entries Harms Jews' Fondness for Truman, JTA, 16 July 2003; Abraham Foxman, "Harry Truman, My Flawed Hero," *The Forward*, 18 July 2003, p.15.

the view of him as the great defender [of Israel. It was comforting to hold that view, and now that view is challenged.]”

Florida rabbi and former newspaper publisher Bruce S. Warshal was one of the most discomfited. Writing in the journal of the Central Conference of American (Reform) Rabbis, Warshal argued that Truman had a right to be "livid," because "Jewish pressure" on him regarding the future of Palestine had been "heavy-handed." In any event, Warshal contended, the president's characterization of Jews was "probably correct," and anyone who regarded Truman's words as antisemitic suffers from "Jewish victim mentality syndrome, which declares that you can't trust anyone [and] thrives on outing anti-Semites among supposed friends."¹⁵

Perhaps the public would not have been quite so shocked, and Truman's defenders a bit less dogmatic, if a noted historian had been more forthcoming about a similar statement by Truman which he found in the president's correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt. In his 1972 book *Eleanor: The Years Alone*, Joseph Lash mentioned that the former First Lady wrote to Truman in the summer of 1947 concerning the British policy of intercepting boatloads of Holocaust survivors sailing for Palestine. Lash quoted two of Eleanor's appeals to the president. In regard to Truman's response, Lash reported only that "Truman called attention to the Jewish capacity to commit outrageous acts." What Truman actually wrote was considerably more jarring than Lash allowed: "The action of some of our United States Zionists will eventually prejudice everyone against what they are trying to get done. I fear very much that the Jews are like all under dogs--when they get on top they are just as intolerant and as cruel as the people were to them when they were underneath."¹⁶

Another prominent historian, John Morton Blum (1921-2011), also once chose to withhold evidence of Truman's antisemitism. Blum revealed this episode in a private interview in 1984 with Henry Morgenthau III, the son of Treasury Secretary Henry

¹⁵ "Release of Diary Entries Harms Jews' Fondness for Truman, JTA, 16 July 2003; Bruce Warshal, "Rabbi Bruce Warshal: 'I'm Voting for Crist and Sink,'" *Florida Sun-Sentinel*, 12 October 2010, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2010-10-12/opinion/fl-jjps-warshal-1013-20101012_1_early-voting-crist-and-sink-kendrick-meek ; Bruce S. Warshal, "Truman's 'Anti-Semitic' Diary Entry," *CCAR Journal*, Summer 2007, pp. 60-67. The second volume of Truman's two-volume postpresidential memoir, published in 1955, included a statement that, while not quite crossing over into antisemitism, exhibited more than a little unfriendliness. "I think I can say that I kept my faith in the rightness of my policy in spite of some of the Jews," the former president wrote. "When I say 'the Jews,' I mean, of course, the extreme Zionists," he added with more than a hint of condescension. "I know that most Americans of Jewish faith, while they hoped for the restoration of Jewish homeland [sic], are and always have been Americans first and foremost." The implication was that Jews who criticized his Palestine policy were not Americans first and foremost. (*Harry S. Truman, Memoirs: Volume 2 - Years of Trial and Hope*, [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1955], p. 160.)

¹⁶ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), p.121. Truman to Eleanor Roosevelt, 23 August 1947, President's Personal File, Truman Library. (Courtesy of Ronald Radosh and Monty N. Penkower.)

Morgenthau, Jr. The interview was one of many that Morgenthau III conducted while working on his family history, *Mostly Morgenthaus*. He interviewed Blum about his role as editor of *From the Morgenthau Diaries*, a three-volume collection of material from Morgenthau Jr.'s papers. In the interview, Blum noted that in addition to using materials that appeared in Morgenthau Jr.'s diaries, he added explanatory notes based on the correspondence and diaries of individuals with whom the treasury secretary interacted. One of those individuals was Henry Stimson, secretary of war under both Roosevelt and Truman, who disagreed strongly with the positions Morgenthau Jr. was urging Truman to take at the upcoming Potsdam conference in 1945.

In their interview, Blum described to Morgenthau III an entry he discovered in Stimson's diary. According to Blum, the entry described a conversation Stimson had with President Truman in the early summer of 1945, in which Stimson threatened that he would refuse to accompany Truman to Potsdam if Morgenthau Jr. was part of the U.S. delegation. Blum recalled: "According to Stimson's diary, Truman then said to Stimson: 'Don't worry, neither Morgenthau nor [Bernard] Baruch nor any of the Jew boys will be going to Pottsdam' [*sic*]."

Blum continued (to Morgenthau III): "So I quoted that. When I read it to [Morgenthau, Jr., he] asked would I be willing to take that out. And I said sure, but why? He said, well I'm sure if Mr. Stimson put it down, President Truman said it--but I don't like the phrase 'Jew boy' in the mouth of any President of the United States. And since it's not in my diary, couldn't we keep it out of our book? I said, OK, I'll take it out--and you won't find it [in *From the Morgenthau Diaries*]."

To judge by Blum's description, Morgenthau Jr. evidently was motivated not by a desire to protect Truman's name or reputation per se, but rather a concern that an expression of antisemitism coming from "the mouth of the president" would give a certain legitimacy to anti-Jewish bigotry. Regardless of Morgenthau's motive, the practical impact of Blum's decision to suppress the Stimson diary entry was to hide from public view an important instance of Truman's private expressions about Jews.¹⁷

There has been at least one additional instance of a cover-up of Truman's antisemitism. William Hillman, a journalist, was hired to assist Truman in preparing his memoirs and other papers for publication. The first volume, *Mr. President*, appeared in 1953. Among the materials it included was the aforementioned June 1945 memo by Truman, which in its original version included the passage about Jews claiming that God "picked 'em out for special privilege." But the version that appeared in *Mr. President* omitted the section about Jews. In Hillman's version, the relevant paragraph read simply: "...I never thought God picked any favorites. It is my studied opinion that

¹⁷ Transcript of Henry Morgenthau III interview with John M. Blum, New Haven, 15 March 1984, p.5, copy in the possession of the author. Morgenthau III quoted in on p. 435 of *Mostly Morgenthaus*.

any race, creed or color can be God's favorites if they act the part--and very few of 'em do that." Prof. Michael Cohen, in his 1990 book *Truman and Israel*, was the first to publish the full text. Whether the omission was Hillman's idea, or undertaken at the insistence of Truman, is not clear.¹⁸

V. RICHARD NIXON

The second president whose unflattering remarks about Jews have become known is Richard Nixon. Accusations of antisemitism against Nixon first surfaced in 1974, during his final months in office. The *New York Times* and CBS-TV reported that in taped Oval Office conversations related to the Watergate investigation, Nixon referred to some of his critics as "Jew boys," complained about "those Jews" in the U.S. Attorney's Office, and charged that damaging information about him was being leaked by Jews in the government to "Jewish liberals" in the news media. Nixon's aides denied the alleged remarks. Later that year, in transcripts of conversations released by the White House, Nixon commented that his daughters' 1972 campaign appearances should be hosted by "Middle America-type of people...The arts, you know--they're Jews, they're left-wing--in other words, stay away."¹⁹

In the years to follow, such reports multiplied and the depth of Nixon's antisemitism became obvious. In 1977, newly-released tapes revealed Nixon blaming Jews for White House leaks. In a tape made public in 1991, Nixon quizzed aides about which anti-war activists were Jewish. In another, he asked an adviser to draw up a list of Jewish employees of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, suspecting they were part of a "Jewish cabal" that was reporting inflated unemployment statistics in order to harm him. The diaries of Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, published in 1994, included a reference to Nixon's belief in the "total Jewish domination of the media." In one entry,

¹⁸ William Hillman, ed. *Mr. President: The first publication from the personal diaries, private letters, papers, and revealing interviews of Harry S. Truman, thirty-second President of the United States of America*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), p.118; Cohen, p.284, n19.

¹⁹ "Nixon Wanted His Daughters to Stay Away from 'the Arts' Because 'They're Jews, They're Left-wing,'" JTA, 7 August 1974.

Haldeman reported that Nixon had “really raged against United States Jews,” and had ordered Haldeman “not to let any Jews see him about the Middle East.”²⁰

Oval Office tapes released in 1996 included Nixon telling Haldeman to “get me the names of the Jews. You know, the big Jewish contributors to the Democrats. Could we please investigate some of the [expletive deleted] ?” Nixon also instructed domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman: “John, we have the power. Are we using it to investigate contributors to Hubert Humphrey, contributors to Muskie — the Jews, you know, that are stealing in every direction? Are we going after their tax returns? You know what I mean? There’s a lot of gold in them thar hills. I can only hope that we are, frankly, doing a little persecuting.” In a follow-up conversation, Nixon said to Haldeman, “What about the rich Jews? The IRS is full of Jews, Bob.” Veteran Democratic Party official Robert Strauss called Nixon's remarks "sickening...this language coming out of the mouth of a president of the United States is more than I can really comprehend."²¹

Tapes that came to light in 1999 included Nixon calling an immigration official in California a "kike," blaming "the Jews" for all his problems, and complaining that "Jews are all over the government." In tapes released in 2002, Nixon could be heard charging that Jews had too much influence in the government, calling them "untrustworthy," and vowing to appoint fewer Jews to positions in his second term; in a later discussion about appointments, Nixon told an aide, "No Jews. We are adamant when I say no Jews." Between 2009 and 2013, the Richard Nixon Presidential Library released the final three batches of White House tapes. In one, Nixon offered this historical perspective on antisemitism: “It happened in Spain, it happened in Germany, it’s happening--and now it’s going to happen in America if these people don’t start behaving....[I]t may be they have a death wish. You know that’s been the problem with our Jewish friends for centuries." In another, he characterized Jews as "aggressive, abrasive and obnoxious." Angry at his attorney Leonard Garment, Nixon shouted “Goddamn his Jewish soul!”²²

Nixon was especially livid about American Jews urging him to press the Soviet Union on Jewish emigration. Referring to the possibility of Jewish demonstrations in connection with a forthcoming U.S.-Soviet summit, Nixon railed (to Henry Kissinger):

²⁰ “Times, CBS-TV Claim Nixon Used Epithet ‘Jew Boy’ Several Times in Taped Conversations with Dean,” 13 May 1974; “Tapes Reveal Nixon Complained That He Was Surrounded by Jews,” JTA, 2 May 1977; Nixon Blamed Jews for Anti-war Activity,” JTA, 7 June 1991; “Haldeman Diaries Attribute Anti-Semitic Comments to Nixon,” JTA, 19 May 1994. A kind of precursor to Truman defender Bruce Warshal, Nixon’s most vociferous Jewish supporter, Massachusetts rabbi Baruch Korff, did not blame the president's Truman-like "rage" on any fist-pounding Jewish leaders, but did continue defending Nixon long after he had resigned in disgrace, and long after the first evidence of Nixon’s antisemitic remarks. (See Joy Sterling, “Nixon’s Rabbi Still Loyal,” *Bergen Record*, 25 July 1976, p.B3.)

²¹ “Tapes: Nixon Targeted Jews in His Anti-Democrat Campaign,” JTA, 10 December 1996.

²² “News Brief,” JTA, 10 March 1999; “News Brief,” JTA, 7 October 1999; “News Brief,” JTA, 4 March 2002 Eric Fingerhut, “Nixon, Graham Talk on Tape of American Anti-Semitism,” JTA, 24 June 2009.

“Let me say, Henry, it’s gonna be the worst thing that happened to Jews in American history.” He added, “If they torpedo this summit--and it might go down for other reasons--I’m gonna put the blame on them, and I’m going to do it publicly at 9 o’clock at night before 80 million people. They put the Jewish interest above America’s interest, and it’s about goddamn time that the Jew in America realizes he’s an American first and a Jew second....[They are holding America] hostage to Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union...the American people are not going to let them destroy our foreign policy--never!”²³

What impact did these antisemitic remarks by presidents or their relatives have in terms of White House policy decisions?

There is no evidence that Joseph Kennedy's antisemitism rubbed off on his son. There is no basis for suspecting that Billy Carter's views were shared by his brother. There is no reason to think that the attitudes of Kennedy’s father or Carter’s brother played any role in shaping the policies of the Kennedy administration or the Carter administration toward Israel. Truman's private feelings about Jews did not prevent him from having a close relationship with Eddie Jacobson, seeking the counsel of Jewish advisers, or recognizing the State of Israel in 1948. Nixon's well-documented antisemitism did not deter him from elevating Henry Kissinger--a foreign-born Jew with a pronounced accent--to the most influential position in U.S. foreign policymaking; nor did it stop the massive American airlift of arms to Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. U.S. policy under Truman and Nixon was determined by other interests, whether electoral, strategic, or both.

VI. THE ROOSEVELTS

In the case of Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, there is evidence of a connection between the private feelings of the president regarding Jews and an important policy related to Jews.

The fact that FDR's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, harbored prejudice against Jews has been mentioned in passing in some Roosevelt family histories. Given the prevalence of anti-Jewish prejudice in the upper strata of New York society in the late 1800s and early 1900s, perhaps it would be surprising had she not subscribed to common stereotypes about Jews and other minorities. Ted Morgan, in his book *FDR: A Biography*, wrote that "there lingered in [FDR] a residue of the social anti-Semitism he had inherited from his mother and other relatives such as his half brother Rosy and his

²³ Ron Kampeas, "Kissinger: Gassing Jews Would Not be a U.S. Problem," JTA, 12 December 2010; "New Nixon Tapes Show More Anti-Semitism," JTA, 22 August 2013.

uncle Fred Delano, all three of them anti-Semites." Morgan mentioned an incident in 1928 in which Sara Roosevelt objected to having FDR adviser Belle Moskowitz join the family for lunch because she did not want "that fat Jewess," as she called her, in the Roosevelt home. Joseph Lash, in his book *Eleanor and Franklin*, reported that Sara Roosevelt once wrote of Elinor Morgenthau: "The wife is very Jewish but appeared very well."²⁴

Roosevelt's relatives were not mentioned at all in the classic 1960s-1970s studies of America's response to the Holocaust, by David S. Wyman, Henry L. Feingold, Saul S. Friedman, and Monty N. Penkower. They saw the president's response to the Holocaust as being determined entirely on the basis of political and military considerations (especially the former), without any reference to FDR's personal views concerning Jews. At that point in time, there was scant evidence of anything noteworthy regarding Roosevelt's private attitudes toward Jews. Sara Roosevelt first appeared in a book in this field only much later--in the 1987 volume *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*, by Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut.²⁵

Breitman and Kraut presented Sara's influence not as a part of the explanation for Roosevelt's lethargic response to the plight of the Jews, but rather as a rationalization for it. "The president's mother was anti-Semitic, his brother even more so," they stated. And: "Some of FDR's best friends were anti-Semites." Their point was not that Roosevelt's relatives and friends influenced him to be antisemitic; on the contrary, while "the young Franklin Roosevelt absorbed some of this sentiment," he "gradually grew out of it." Rather, they speculated, it was because of this milieu that FDR was "aware of the influence of anti-Semitism in the United States" and consequently became so sensitive --"overly insensitive," they wrote-- "to the danger of anti-Semitic reaction to American policies." In other words, President Roosevelt was reluctant to aid Europe's Jews only because he was so committed to heading off a surge of antisemitism in America.²⁶

²⁴ Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p.298; Joseph Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), p. 295.

²⁵ David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938-1941* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968); Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970); Saul S. Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy toward Refugees, 1938-1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973); Monty N. Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987). Although Penkower's first book on the subject, *The Jews Were Expendable*, was published in 1983, it incorporates a number of essays that he published during the 1970s; hence it is included here among the first wave of research on America and the Holocaust, which appeared between 1968 and 1979.

²⁶ Breitman and Kraut, p.245.

Surprisingly, Prof. Breitman chose to push Sara Roosevelt to the front and center of his 2013 book, *FDR and the Jews* (coauthored with Allan Lichtman)--and he did so in order to argue that Sara influenced her son to *reject* antisemitism. The opening scene of the book dramatically presented the elderly Sara, just "four months before her death," addressing a Jewish women's group. Breitman and Lichtman also emphasized that a Jewish organization once gave her an award for "service to the Jewish people." This was presented as evidence that "Franklin's parents instilled in him religious tolerance..." and imparted to him "the wise counsel needed to escape the anti-Semitism that was so common among upper-class Protestants."

Breitman and Lichtman called the award "the Einstein Medal for lifetime humanitarian service to the Jewish people," but the sources they cited said otherwise. One source, a book of correspondence between Sara and Eleanor, stated that the award was "the Einstein Medal for Humanitarianism," given in honor of her "broad sympathy and activities in elevating the conditions of all people throughout the world who suffer from poverty, oppression, and hatred." Breitman and Lichtman's other source, a news article in the *New York Times* in 1938, reported that the award was given "in recognition of 'a lifetime of devoted service to every communal cause in the country.'" Neither source mentioned anything about her service "to the Jewish people." Prof. Breitman has not explained what additional evidence he uncovered that led him to reverse his earlier judgement (in his 1987 book) that Sara Roosevelt "was anti-Semitic."²⁷

By contrast, some of Sara Roosevelt's other defenders have acknowledged problems in the presentation of the president's mother as a philosemite. Until mid-2013, the web site of Roosevelt House--a wing of Hunter College, located in Sara's former residence in Manhattan--showcased an essay depicting Mrs. Roosevelt as a major benefactor of Jewish immigrants in America and a champion of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis. The sources cited by the authors of the essay, Prof. Deborah Gardner and graduate research associate Ben Hellwege, did not hold up well. Many of the sources cited Mrs. Roosevelt's involvement with Jewish-sponsored but nonsectarian charities. The *New York Times* articles they cited as evidence of her concern for Jewish refugees

²⁷ Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp.8, 245. Breitman did not respond to this author's email on November 11, 2013, requesting clarification. Lichtman replied on November 18, 2013, that he would not respond because this author's review of their book in *Ha'aretz* was, in his view, "disrespectful." In a peculiar footnote to this episode, Breitman and Lichtman, in their book, thanked one Richard J. Garfunkel as the source for their information about Sara Roosevelt. Garfunkel is not a historian; he is the host of an obscure weekly radio show in New Rochelle, NY, and describes himself as "a collector of FDR memorabilia for over 50 years," who owns "over 5000 pieces, that include buttons, books, pictures, campaign literature and ephemera of every imaginable type." He has even "developed a lecture called 'FDR the Collector, and Collecting FDR.'" Breitman and Lichtman, p. 332, n.1; for Garfunkel's self-description, see <http://www.richardjgarfunkel.com/2005/05/15/warm-springs-and-fdr-the-television-production-2005/>

reported that Mrs. Roosevelt served as honorary chair of the American Committee for Christian German Refugees, and assisted Friendship House, a Catholic religious institution involved in general civic work.²⁸ In response to complaints, Dr. Gardner in July 2013 removed the article from the Roosevelt House website pending corrections to the text.²⁹

VII. LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON?

The real significance of Sara Roosevelt's opinions about Jews is whether there was any continuity of views from mother to son.³⁰ Franklin Roosevelt's biographers agree that he was very close to, and strongly influenced by, his mother. FDR's views on race and religion were nurtured in a certain milieu, of which his parents and other relatives were a part. Still, FDR was his own man and there were undoubtedly subjects on which he formed opinions different from those of his mother, based on his own experiences or education. Is there credible evidence that FDR shared the views Sara privately expressed about Jews (for example, when referring to Belle Moskowitz and Elinor Morgenthau)? More important, if he did share such prejudice, was it a deeply held conviction that actually influenced his worldview and even aspects of his policymaking?

The answer to these questions is related to the central mystery of Franklin Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust. During FDR's years in office, 1933-1945, immigration to the United States was governed by a quota system that severely limited the admission of refugees in general, and impacted European Jewish refugees in particular. Yet despite these legal limitations, many more could have entered under the existing law than actually did. That was because the Roosevelt administration did not merely obey the existing immigration law--it quietly went far above and beyond the law, with the president's approval. The State Department, which implemented the

²⁸ "President's Mother Takes Refugee Post," NYT, 3 April 1939, p.17; "To Give Tea and Musicales," NYT, 27 February 1941, p.16.

²⁹ Gardner to Medoff, 31 July 2013 and 17 December 2013.

³⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, too, made antisemitic remarks in her early years, although evidently she shed that prejudice under the impact of later experiences. See Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), pp.53, 198, 295, 379, 750; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt - Volume One 1884-1933* (New York: Viking, 1998), pp.299, 388; Peter Collier with David Horowitz, *The Roosevelts: An American Saga* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p.281; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt - Volume Two: 1933-1938, The Defining Years* (New York: Viking, 2000), pp. 316-317 (quoting Sarah Gertrude Millin, *The Night Is Long* [London: Faber & Faber, 1941], pp.249-255, 571); Monty Noam Penkower, *The Holocaust and Israel Reborn: From Catastrophe to Sovereignty* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp.271-272.

president's immigration policy, severely reduced the number of refugees admitted, by imposing additional requirements on would-be immigrants and looking for any possible reason, no matter how trivial, to disqualify applicants. Assistant Secretary of State Wilbur Carr, who was in charge of immigration visas during FDR's first term, was unabashedly hostile to Jews and bitterly opposed to immigration. The president refused repeated requests by Labor Secretary Frances Perkins and refugee advocates to compel Carr to administer the immigration laws less harshly. Breckinridge Long, whom FDR later appointed to fill Carr's position, was likewise antisemitic and anti-foreigner, and initiated additional restrictions on the granting of immigration visas. In his diary, Long recorded a conversation he had with FDR in October 1940 that sheds light on the president's perspective. Long wrote that Roosevelt assured him "that he was 100% in accord with my ideas [on restricting immigration]. The President expressed himself as in entire accord with the policy which would exclude persons about whom there was any suspicion that they would be inimical to the welfare of the United States no matter who had vouchsafed for them. I left him with the satisfactory thought that he was wholeheartedly in support of the policy which would resolve in favor of the United States any doubts about admissibility of any individual."³¹

The consequences of the administration's policy were dramatic. The law permitted a maximum of 25,957 German citizens to enter each year (it increased to 27,370 when the German and Austrian quotas were combined following Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938). The actual number admitted, however, was just 1,375 in 1933, meaning that the quota was almost 95% unfilled. In 1934, 3,556 entered; the quota was 86% unfilled. The following year, it was 80% unfilled. Unused quota places did not roll over into the next year; if not filled, they expired. For the entire period of the Nazi regime, 1933 to 1945, more than 190,000 quota spaces from Germany and Axis-occupied countries sat unused. Why would Roosevelt adopt an approach that would produce such a harsh result?

Even when special circumstances might have moved the president to permit greater immigration—within the existing laws—he preferred to take the most rigid approach. In 1934, for example, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins devised a way, within the existing law, to facilitate increased Jewish refugee immigration through the posting of bonds by friends or relatives. The State Department, which administered the immigration system, opposed the plan; FDR sided with State.³² In the spring of 1939,

³¹ Bat-Ami Zucker, "Frances Perkins and the German Jewish Refugees, 1933-1940," *American Jewish History* 89 (March 2001), 35-60"; diary of Breckinridge Long, entries for 3 October 1940 and 10 October 1940, Breckinridge Long Papers (hereafter BLP), Library of Congress (hereafter LOC), Washington, D.C.

³² Bat-Ami Zucker, *In Search of Refuge: Jews and U.S. Consuls in Nazi Germany 1933-1941* (New York and London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001), pp.81-82, 93.

the 930 refugees aboard the ship *St. Louis* could have been saved by allowing them to stay temporarily, as tourists, in the Virgin Islands, an American territory. Instead, the administration found a technicality to disqualify them from receiving tourist visas. At about the same time, members of Congress introduced legislation, known as the Wagner-Rogers bill, to permit the non-quota admission of 20,000 refugee children. Because of their age, they would have posed no competition to America's labor force and would have been supported entirely by private sources. The president nonetheless declined to support the measure; the following year, however, FDR supported bringing British children to the United States to escape the German bombing of London. Why the double standard?

Defenders of FDR's response to the Holocaust argue that any proposal to liberalize the immigration system would have provoked significant congressional and public opposition. That is no doubt true, but it is a red herring. Roosevelt could have quietly instructed the State Department to permit the existing quotas to be filled. No public controversy or battle with congress was required. Conforming to existing law would have sufficed. So why didn't he?

VIII. JUST JOKING

Roosevelt's private opinions regarding Jews, which have gradually come to light over the years, help answer the question about the motives behind his immigration policy. The ways in which some historians have treated the evidence of his opinions, however, raise new and troubling questions about the standards and responsibilities of scholars.

The first inkling that FDR's private attitude toward Jews was less than amiable came during the mid-1950s debate over the publication of the transcripts of Roosevelt's February 1945 conference with Josef Stalin and Winston Churchill at Yalta. In 1953, Republican senators began pressing for publication of the full transcripts of the conference. The State Department opposed publishing the records, on the grounds that they contained sensitive information that might be harmful to the United States or its allies. Eventually, in March 1955, the Yalta transcripts were released as part of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series. Two passages that appeared in the original Yalta minutes were deleted from the published version. One had to do with a conversation between American and Soviet military commanders. The other pertained to an exchange between FDR and Stalin concerning Jews.

Had the State Department simply left in the passage about Jews, it might have attracted less notice. Instead, the obvious omission intrigued observers. The *New York*

Times reported that Roosevelt and Stalin discussed Soviet Jewry, Zionism, and the Soviet attempt to establish a Jewish “homeland” in the Siberian region of Birobidzhan. The *Times* correspondent then added: “It is not entirely clear from the text why Stalin began talking about the Jewish problem. A line of asterisks preceding Stalin’s statement seems to raise the possibility that one of Stalin’s high-level colleagues may have initiated the discussion of Jews with a statement that has been censored from the published text.” As it would turn out, it was a statement by Roosevelt, not one of Stalin’s aides, that had been censored.

The mystery deepened two days later, when the *Washington Post* published an editorial criticizing the deletions as “pernicious” and an attempt to “doctor history.” It noted that among the deletions were “some remarks by President Roosevelt about the Jews,” although it did not spell them out. “In historical perspective, President Roosevelt will have to be judged as a whole man, indiscretions and all,” the *Post* argued. Three days later, the text of FDR’s censored statement was published, by *U.S. News and World Report*. It reported that when Roosevelt mentioned he would soon be seeing Saudi Arabian leader Ibn Saud, Stalin asked if he intended to make any concessions to the king; “The President replied that there was only one concession he thought he might offer and that was to give him the six million Jews in the United States.” The Jewish Telegraphic Agency poured cold water on the report, citing “political quarters in Washington” as pointing out “that *U.S. News and World Report* is a leading anti-New Deal organ which has frequently printed allegations against the Democratic Administration and Presidents Roosevelt and Truman.”³³

The following year, an inquiry from a Brooklyn businessman triggered a discussion within the State Department as to whether or not to formally acknowledge that Roosevelt made the remark. After nearly two months, Deputy Assistant Secretary Burke Wilkinson replied to the letter-writer that FDR did make “an off-hand comment...concerning the Jews,” but Wilkinson did not say what the comment was. Wilkinson explained that it had been omitted “for the reason that it would give needless offense, while contributing nothing to policy.”³⁴

Finally, in 1973, the *U.S. News* account was confirmed in the autobiography of Charles E. Bohlen, a senior State Department official who was part of the U.S.

³³ Harry Schwartz, “Stalin Called Himself a Zionist But Cited Soviet Jewish ‘Problem,’” *NYT*, 17 March 1955, p.79; “Doctored History Again,” *Washington Post and Times-Herald* (editorial), 19 March 1955, p. 10; “Roosevelt’s Alleged Yalta Remarks on Jews Doubted in Washington,” *JTA*, 23 March 1955. According to the *American Jewish Year Book 1946-1947*, there were actually only about five million, not six million, Jews in the United States in 1945. (“Statistics of Jews,” *The American Jewish Year Book 5707 [1946-1947]*, [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946],p.599.)

³⁴ Franklin to Noble, 12 September 1956; Wilkinson to Messing, 17 October 1956; and undated memo, “Confidential: Data on Point 3 of the Secretary’s Memorandum,” p.2, all courtesy of Joshua Botts.

delegation to Yalta and served as FDR's chief translator and minute-taker. But by then, the 1955 controversy had been long forgotten. Eventually, the identity of the censor was revealed as well: documents that were declassified in 2010, and publicized in a 2011 essay by Joshua Botts of the State Department's Office of the Historian, identified Assistant Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith as having crossed out the controversial lines. Smith wrote in the transcript's margin: "Delete this--it is not pertinent history."³⁵

What was the ultimate significance of Roosevelt's little joke at Yalta about Jews? For FDR's most ardent defenders, his comment was not merely innocuous but actually a good thing: Breitman and Lichtman contended that Roosevelt "was using anti-Semitism as an ice-breaker with Stalin." Who could object to breaking the ice and thereby, perhaps, advancing the cause of world peace? The problem is that an "ice-breaker" is, by definition, something that is done at the beginning of a conversation, in order to facilitate a more open discussion. Yet Roosevelt did not make his joke about Jews until the next-to-last day of the week-long Yalta conference. Breitman and Lichtman did not explain this inconsistency.³⁶

Humor sometimes reflects the speaker's genuine feelings of disdain or prejudice toward the target of the joke. FDR is known to have made jokes about Jews on more than one occasion. In a letter that he wrote to Eleanor in about 1908, for example, Roosevelt poked fun at her for donating funds to organizations involved in settlement-house work in mostly-Jewish neighborhoods of New York City. He wrote: "You can pat your little back about fifty times and with eyes raised Heavenward exclaim in accents of deep content 'Yea! I have saved the lives of a score of blessed little ones of the Chosen Race!'" After the Roosevelts' fifth child was born, FDR joked that family members opposed his idea of naming the child Isaac (after one of his great-great-grandfathers)

³⁵ Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p.203; " 'Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire': The Politics of the Yalta FRUS," remarks by Joshua Botts, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, delivered at the June 2011 conference of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations, in Alexandria, VA, and posted at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus-history/research/politics-of-the-yalta-frus> ; Transcript page for February 10, 1945, with Smith's handwriting.

Smith, incidentally, was a general who had served on the staff of Dwight D. Eisenhower during World War II. After a visit to postwar Poland with Eisenhower's adviser on Jewish affairs, Rabbi Judah Nadich, Smith remarked to Nadich: "I can't understand it. In Germany--alright, at least the Jews here were wealthy; they were in positions of power; they were in journalism and banking, and so I can understand it a little bit a least. But why in Poland? The Jews there were poor, and the Jews there had no power. Why was there such hatred of them by the Poles?" Nadich was troubled to realize that Smith, with whom he was friendly, "felt that there could be some justification for anti-Semitism because of the fact that Jews were wealthy in Germany and had positions of power." (Joseph W. Bendersky, *The 'Jewish Threat': Anti-Semitic Politics of the U.S. Army* [New York: Basic Books, 2000], p.308.

³⁶ Breitman and Lichtman, 301.

because, as he put it, “the baby’s nose is slightly Hebraic & the family have visions of Ikey Rosenvelt, though I insist it is very good New Amsterdam Dutch.”³⁷

Evidently such utterances were not merely youthful indiscretions; Roosevelt’s fondness for distasteful humor about Jews seems to have continued throughout his adult life. FDR biographer Geoffrey Ward described (in 1989) a 1923 fishing trip with Roosevelt off the coast of Florida, during which his friend Lewis Ledyard, Jr. “hooked and landed a 42-pound Jewfish. ‘...I thought we left New York to get *away* from the Jews,’ his wife said, and Franklin thought the remark so good he included it in his log.” Elsewhere in that log, FDR added a little Jewish joke of his own: “The tip end of Florida is where Jonah had his trying experience--he was a Hebrew and hence cast up.” Roosevelt’s friend and closest political adviser, Louis Howe, later presented FDR with an album of anecdotes, photos, and illustrations from the trip, including one of “a Jewfish with a prominent nose and a sort of crest from which hung the triple balls of a pawnbroker’s sign.”³⁸

In an interview with Ward, Curtis Roosevelt, one of the president’s grandchildren, said that he “recalled hearing the President tell mildly anti-Semitic stories in the White House.” Curtis excused his grandfather’s choice of jokes on the grounds that Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., himself a Jew, “laughed as hard as anyone in the room.” Ward alluded to the reason for Morgenthau’s behavior: “The protagonists [in FDR’s jokes] were always Lower East Side Jews with heavy accents, men of quite another class from Franklin Roosevelt and his Dutchess County neighbor [Morgenthau].” Whether Morgenthau genuinely felt comfortable ridiculing unassimilated Jews, or did so to ingratiate himself with the Roosevelts, does not change the fact that FDR voiced such unpleasant sentiments.³⁹

³⁷ The “Chosen Race” remark first appeared in *Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt - Volume 1: 1884-1933* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992), p.192; Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), pp.390-395.

³⁸ Geoffrey C. Ward, *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp.661, 676.

³⁹ Ward, p.253, note 45. Breitman and Lichtman (p.9, note 4 of *FDR and the Jews*) cited Ward’s book as their source for a point about Roosevelt’s adolescence, but made no mention of Ward’s revelation concerning the president’s jokes about Jews--an odd omission, considering the title and subject of their book.

IX. “SPREAD THE JEWS THIN”

In 1961, the State Department released a volume in its series *Foreign Relations of the United States* featuring documents about U.S. diplomatic affairs involving Europe during 1942. It included the minutes of a conversation at the White House on May 29, 1942, between President Roosevelt, his adviser Harry Hopkins, and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov. At one point, Hopkins remarked that the American public’s view of Soviet Communists had been damaged by the presence in the American Communist Party of “largely disgruntled, frustrated, in effectual, and vociferous people--including a comparatively high proportion of distinctly unsympathetic Jews.” According to the translator at the meeting, Harvard University professor Samuel H. Cross, “On this the President commented that he was far from anti-Semitic, as everyone knew, but there was a good deal in this point of view.” Molotov, Roosevelt, and Hopkins then apparently agreed that “there were Communists and Communists,” which they compared to what they called “the distinction between ‘Jews’ and ‘Kikes’,” all of which was “something that created inevitable difficulties.”⁴⁰

Once again, a disturbing remark by the president failed to attract attention, perhaps because it appeared in a source that only scholars, not the general public, were likely to consult. Except when there is some surrounding controversy (as in the case of the Yalta papers), *Foreign Relations of the United States* is virtually unknown to the wider public. Although the White House meeting with Molotov is described in almost every biography of FDR, as well as books about U.S.-Soviet relations and World War II diplomacy, the antisemitic exchange is almost never mentioned. It did finally make it into print in Frank Costigliola’s 2012 book, *Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances*, which did not cause a public stir but did force FDR partisans to address it. Hence in *FDR and the Jews*, Breitman and Lichtman acknowledged the Molotov exchange (citing Costigliola), but explained it away as another example of Roosevelt using antisemitism as an “ice-breaker.” Once again, however, the “ice-breaker” theory was contradicted by the timeline of events. The *Foreign Relations* transcript described a discussion about various topics that was held when Molotov arrived at the White House; another detailed conversation that took place before dinner; yet another during dinner; and then a final one after dinner, in the president’s study. It was only in that very last segment (and just before the conclusion of that segment) that the exchange about Jews took place. Far

⁴⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States - Diplomatic Papers 1942, Volume III: Europe* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), pp.570-571.

from serving as an “ice-breaker,” the antisemitic remarks were uttered many hours after the ice was broken.⁴¹

Seven years later, another unnoticed bombshell made its way into *Foreign Relations of the United States*. In 1968, the State Department released a *Foreign Relations* volume covering Roosevelt's January 1943 conference in Casablanca with French officials following the Allied conquest of North Africa. The transcript reported a discussion regarding the postwar status of the 300,000 Jews living in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. FDR said "the number of Jews should be definitely limited to the percentage that the Jewish population in North Africa bears to the whole of the North African population. Such a plan would therefore permit the Jews to engage in the professions, at the same time would not permit them to overcrowd the professions....The President stated that his plan would further eliminate the specific and understandable complaints which the Germans bore towards the Jews in Germany, namely, that while they represented a small part of the population, over fifty percent of the lawyers, doctors, school teachers, college professors, etc, in Germany, were Jews."⁴²

Roosevelt's statement in effect rationalized German antisemitism as an “understandable” response to Jewish behavior. The president masked his recommendation as an act of benevolence: he was just trying to help the Jews, by restricting their domineering behavior so people would not hate them for it. Several later defenders of FDR employed a similar spin. Robert Rosen (*Saving the Jews*, 2006) argued that Roosevelt's noble intention in taking that position was “to meliorate, in a ‘fair’ way, local discrimination against Jews.” Breitman and Lichtman (*FDR and the Jews*, 2013) contended that FDR's “loose comments” about Jews at Casablanca really were simply an attempt “to provide opportunities for Jews, without unduly antagonizing Moslems.” Despite these efforts to recast Roosevelt's position as something resembling affirmative action, the plain meaning of the president's words was a recommendation to

⁴¹ Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 168-169; Breitman and Lichtman, p.301.

⁴² *Foreign Relations of the United States - The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942 and Casablanca Conference, 1943* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), p.608; Robert N. Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), p. 259; Breitman and Lichtman, p.249. Although the Casablanca statement about Jews did not garner attention when it was first published in 1968, it did gain some additional circulation in 1979, when Bernard Wasserstein included it on p.207 in his book, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), and in 1984, when David S. Wyman included it in *The Abandonment of the Jews* (p.313). Wasserstein participated in a 1993 conference on “FDR and the Holocaust” held at Hyde Park, sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. The overwhelming majority of the speakers were scholars, from various fields, who defended, minimized, or excused Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust. At one point, Wasserstein quoted FDR's Casablanca remarks about Jews. According to the published transcript of the proceedings, none of the other participants commented on Wasserstein's point. (Verne W. Newton, ed., *FDR and the Holocaust* [New York: St. Martin's, 1996], p.12)

discriminate against North African Jews in order to prevent them from dominating the local economy.

The next published slur by Roosevelt about Jews likewise eluded significant public notice. Selections from the diary of Vice President Henry Wallace, published in 1973, included Wallace's account of a conversation at the White House on May 22, 1943, between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt. When the conversation reached the subject of the status of the Jews after the war, FDR told Churchill about proposals drawn up by his adviser on refugee matters, the renowned geographer and Johns Hopkins University president, Isaiah Bowman. The president had commissioned Bowman to study "the problem of working out the best way to settle the Jewish question." According to Wallace, FDR approvingly described Bowman's plan, which "essentially is to spread the Jews thin all over the world. The president said he had tried this out in [Meriwether] County, Georgia [which Roosevelt often visited in the 1920s] and at Hyde Park on the basis of adding four or five Jewish families at each place. He claimed that the local population would have no objection if there were no more than that." Once again, a remarkable comment appeared in a volume of interest primarily to scholars and thus escaped public controversy. Almost all later Roosevelt scholars simply ignored the statement, with the exception of Breitman and Lichtman, who in *FDR and the Jews* minimized it as "a pithy anecdote."⁴³

X. A "JEWISH PROBLEM" AT HARVARD

As additional unflattering statements by Roosevelt about Jews trickled out in the years to follow, they continued to reflect one of several specific notions: that the concentration of too many Jews in any single profession, institution, or geographic locale is undesirable; that America is by nature, and should remain, an overwhelmingly white, Protestant country; and that Jews have certain innate characteristics which are undesirable.

In 1989, for example, FDR biographer Geoffrey C. Ward revealed a startling entry in the diary of Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. It seems that on January 21, 1942, Leo Crowley, the president's wartime Alien Property Custodian, lunched with the president. Three days later, Crowley relayed to Secretary Morgenthau a portion of their conversation. Morgenthau wrote in his diary:

⁴³ Blum, pp.210-211; Breitman and Lichtman, p.249. Wallace actually wrote "Marietta County," but there is no such county in Georgia; the president must have meant Meriwether County, where Warm Springs was located.

Then Leo said that for no apparent reason whatsoever the President proceeded to give him the following lecture. He said, “Leo, you know this is a Protestant country, and the Catholics and Jews are here on sufferance,” and he said, “It is up to both of you to go along with anything that I want at this time.” Leo said he never was so shocked in his life. So I said, ‘Leo, what are we fighting for? What am I killing myself for at this desk if we are just here by sufferance?’ and Leo said, ‘That’s what I want to know.’ So I said, ‘About a month ago I had something similar happen[,] but not nearly as bad [,] at Cabinet. I talked to the President about it afterwards, and he proceeded to give me a lecture and cited as an example how there were two Catholic judges in Nebraska, and he had refused to appoint a third.

The diary entry concluded: “I told Leo that what he was telling me about the President was far more disturbing to me than all the Alien Property Custodian [the issue that Crowley went to discuss with FDR] in the world, and he said that he agreed with me and that he had not discussed it with another living soul because he did not feel that he dared do so.”⁴⁴

Another unpleasant anecdote from the Morgenthau Diaries appeared the following year in Frank Freidel’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny*. According to Morgenthau, FDR remarked during a November 1941 cabinet meeting that there were too many Jews among federal employees in Oregon. Morgenthau subsequently asked FDR, in private, if that statement “wasn’t giving the cabinet officers the impression that he did not want too many Jews in government.” The president’s response confirmed Morgenthau’s fear. Roosevelt cited an incident in 1923, when he was a member of Harvard University’s Board of Overseers: “Some years ago a third of the entering class at Harvard were Jews and the question came up as to how it should be handled,” FDR told Morgenthau. “I asked [a fellow-board member] whether we should discuss it with the Board of Overseers and it was decided that we should....It was decided that over a period of years the number of Jews should be reduced one or two per cent a year until it was down to 15%....I treat the Catholic situation just the same....I appointed three men in Nebraska—all Catholics—and they wanted

⁴⁴ Ward, p.255, n.48 (quoting an abbreviated version); Morgenthau Diaries, 27 January 1942, 1061, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

me to appoint another Catholic, and I said that I wouldn't do it....You can't get a disproportionate amount of any one religion.”⁴⁵

Roosevelt supporters tried to put the best face on the Harvard quota ugliness. Breitman and Lichtman belittled it as evidence that FDR merely “did not subscribe to a strict meritocracy” (as if he did subscribe to, say, a slightly relaxed meritocracy). They wrote that Roosevelt “supported” the Jewish quota, not explaining that he helped initiate the proposal and was a member of the board that authorized it. Rosen, in *Saving the Jews*, actually portrayed FDR’s role in the quota as a positive: “Roosevelt was, above all, a practical man. He could look a problem in the eye and address it.” It seems that in Rosen’s eyes, as in FDR’s, the presence of too many Jewish students at Harvard constituted a “problem.”⁴⁶

In 1999, Professors Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones authored a history of the Ochs-Sulzberger family, the owners of the *New York Times*. Tifft and Jones described President Roosevelt’s dissatisfaction with the *Times*, especially because of the newspaper’s strong opposition to his plan to revamp the Supreme Court. When *Times* owner Adolph Ochs passed away in 1937, FDR noted with satisfaction that in order to pay the inheritance tax and retain some control of the newspaper, the Sulzbergers apparently would have to sell a significant portion of their stock, thus reducing their influence over the *Times*’s editorial positions. The Sulzbergers, however, found a legal loophole that enabled them to pay the taxes without having to sell any of their stock. According to Tifft and Jones, an infuriated Roosevelt commented to U.S. Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi: “It’s a dirty Jewish trick.” In Roosevelt’s mind, the ability to dishonestly maneuver out of a difficult legal or financial dilemma was a Jewish characteristic.⁴⁷

The most recent revelation about Roosevelt’s private views appeared in this author’s book, *FDR and the Holocaust: A Breach of Faith*, published in 2013. A previously unpublished memorandum by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the most prominent American Jewish leader of that era, described a meeting he had with President Roosevelt in Washington on January 22, 1938. After Wise made reference to the mistreatment of Jews in East European countries, Roosevelt relayed an anecdote from

⁴⁵ Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), pp. 295-296; Morgenthau Diaries, 26 November 1941, FDRL.

⁴⁶ Breitman and Lichtman, p.11; Rosen, p.11.

⁴⁷ Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times* (New York: 1999), p.171.

the Polish ambassador to Washington, Count Jerzy Potocki. Wise noted that FDR “quoted Potocki as though he assented to every word [that Potocki] said”:

Then F.D.R. said something that was very painful to SSW [Wise composed his account in the third person], showing how much he is, alas, under the impact of the Ambassadors who have access to him....F.D.R. gave a long explanation straight out of the mouth of Potocki, namely that, while forty and fifty years ago, [Potocki’s] father and grandfather got all their products from the Jewish grain dealer and the Jewish shoe dealer and the Jewish shopkeeper and the little Jewish villagers surrounding their castle, in recent years the Poles have been turning to him and to the people in the castle and saying—“Why don’t you buy things from us and not from the Jews”; and Potocki added—“We gave them a chance but we found they could not deliver the same goods at the same price, so they lost out in the competition with the Jewish shopkeepers. Then the next step was that the Christian shopkeepers complained—why must the Jews do all the business with the estate; and after that—the Jew should go.”

Once again, in FDR’s eyes the essential problem was Jewish prominence and domination. The alleged Jewish control of the local economy in Potocki’s village was to blame for Christian shopkeepers demanding that “the Jew should go.” Wise protested, “But, Chief, this is pure Fascist talk. They must find scapegoats to whom to point in order to satisfy the landless and unfed peasantry, and the Jew is the convenient and traditional and historical scapegoat.” Wise’s plea was to no avail; FDR evidently “assented to every word” Potocki had said, according to Wise. “It was,” Wise wrote, “like a blow in the face to have F.D.R. swallow and regurgitate this stuff of Potocki, himself of the landed gentry.”⁴⁸

Another part of Wise’s memo described his discussion with Roosevelt about the potential for development of Palestine. Oddly, Breitman and Lichtman, in *FDR and the*

⁴⁸ “Report of Meeting of S.S.W. with F.D.R., Saturday morning, Jan. 22, 1938,” A243/83, SSW-CZA, Jerusalem, 4. The historian Henry Feingold has recounted an uncorroborated incident in which “a German delegation came to see [President Roosevelt] in 1937 to complain that German culture was being transmitted to the German people through Jewish hands and Jewish eyes, that the four redactors of Goethe were Jewish, so were too many symphony orchestra conductors, and so on. Roosevelt shook his head in understanding and advised that a quota system was in order. (*FDR and the Holocaust: Did the President do all he could to save European Jewry?*, Harvard Club, NYC: May 1997 [Leo Baeck Institute Occasional Paper No. 2], pp.18-19.)

Jews, quoted the Palestine portion of the Wise memo but omitted the anecdote about Jews controlling the Polish economy.⁴⁹

As noted above, Roosevelt made at least four statements, over a period of five years, complaining about Jewish overrepresentation in North Africa, Oregon, Harvard, and Poland. He made four additional unflattering statements about Jews' characteristics or the need to "spread the Jews out thin." He also made multiple disparaging jokes about Jews. Taken by themselves, these remarks are deeply troubling. They assume greater significance when viewed in the context of FDR's statements in the 1920s about immigration, race, and assimilation. Those 1920s statements received their first comprehensive analysis in Prof. Greg Robinson's 2001 book, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*.⁵⁰ To understand Roosevelt's motives in approving the mass internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, Robinson took a close look at a long-forgotten newspaper interview FDR gave when he was the 1920 Democratic vice presidential candidate, and a series of articles that Roosevelt wrote for the *Macon Daily Telegraph* in the mid-1920s, when he was living part time in Warm Springs, Georgia.

In the interview, published in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on July 18, 1920, Roosevelt said he accepted the principle of some immigration--provided that the newcomers were dispersed and quickly assimilated:

Our main trouble in the past has been that we have permitted the foreign elements to segregate in colonies. They have crowded into one district and they have brought congestion and racial prejudices to our large cities. The result is that they do not easily conform to the manners and the customs and the requirements of their new home. Now, the remedy for this should be the distribution of aliens in various parts of the country. If we had the greater part of the foreign population of the City of New York distributed to different localities upstate we should have a far better condition. Of course, this could not be done by legislative enactment. It could only be done by inducement—if better financial conditions and better living conditions could be offered to the alien dwellers in the cities.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Breitman and Lichtman, p.100. In an email on November 11, 2013, I asked Prof. Breitman why he and his coauthor withheld the unflattering part from publication. He did not respond.

⁵⁰ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁵¹ Robinson, p.35.

In a 1923 essay for *Asia* magazine, focusing on the hot button issue of Asian immigration to the United States, FDR expressed sympathy for what he said was the widespread view “that the mingling of white with oriental blood on an extensive scale is harmful to our future citizenship.” He added: “As a corollary of this conviction, Americans object to the holding of large amounts of real property, of land, by aliens or those descended from mixed marriages. Frankly, they do not want non-assimilable immigrants as citizens, nor do they desire any extensive proprietorship of land without citizenship.”⁵²

It is evident from the articles he wrote for the *Macon Daily Telegraph* that Roosevelt was endorsing the views he cited in his *Asia* article, rather than merely reporting on trends in public opinion. In his April 23, 1925, column, for example, FDR explained that he did not oppose all immigration; he favored the admission of some Europeans, so long as they had “blood of the right sort.” He endorsed the need to restrict immigration for “a good many years to come” so the United States would have time to “digest” those who had already been admitted. He also proposed limiting subsequent immigration to those who could be most quickly and easily assimilated, including through dispersal around the country. He argued: “If, twenty-five years ago, the United States had adopted a policy of this kind we would not have the huge foreign sections which exist in so many of our cities.”⁵³

In his April 30, 1925, column for the *Macon* newspaper, Roosevelt wrote: “Californians have properly objected [to Japanese immigration to their state] on the sound basic ground that Japanese immigrants are not capable of assimilation into the American population....Anyone who has traveled in the Far East knows that the mingling of Asiatic blood with European or American blood produces, in nine cases out of ten, the most unfortunate results.”⁵⁴

XI. “NO JEWISH BLOOD”

FDR’s references to blood--that is, innate racial or biological differences between the races--dovetail with another remark he made about Jews. Published last year in this author’s *FDR and the Holocaust*, it derives from a conversation in 1939 between President Roosevelt and Senator Burton Wheeler (D-Montana), concerning possible Democratic candidates for president and vice president in 1940. (Roosevelt had not yet

⁵² Ibid., p. 38.

⁵³ Ibid., p.38.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.40.

declared his intention to seek re-election.) Towards the end of the meeting, the president expressed doubt that a ticket composed of Secretary of State Cordell Hull for president and Democratic National Committee chairman Jim Farley for vice president could be elected. Wheeler responded (according to a memorandum he composed following the meeting):

I said to the President someone told me that Mrs. Hull was a Jewess, and I said that the Jewish-Catholic issue would be raised [if Hull was nominated for president, and Farley, a Catholic, was his running mate]. He said, "Mrs. Hull is about one quarter Jewish." He said, "You and I Burt are old English and Dutch stock. We know who our ancestors are. We know there is no Jewish blood in our veins, but a lot of these people do not know whether there is Jewish blood in their veins or not."⁵⁵

FDR's concern about bloodlines was an interest that he shared with his mother. "His mother could recite pedigrees from a repertoire that seemed to include half the aristocracy of Europe and all that of the Hudson River Valley," FDR biographer Frank Freidel wrote. "At least a dozen lines of Mayflower descent converged in Franklin, and Sara could name every one of them. There were times when she thoroughly irritated her daughter-in-law [Eleanor] with her genealogical talk." Franklin "had effortlessly acquired the knowledge from his mother, [and] could as a matter of course plunge into similar recitations," according to Freidel. "One of the main bodies of knowledge he mastered at Harvard--if one were to judge only by his letters to his mother--was genealogy. He unearthed several Puritan Pomeroyes to add to the family records, and wrote an essay on the most famous of his forebears, the rebellious Anne Hutchinson. In 1901, when he was writing a history thesis on the 'Roosevelts in New Amsterdam,' he asked his mother to copy for him 'all the extracts in our old Dutch Bible.'" Even decades later, FDR made much of his ancestors, "whose exploits he recounted frequently in his presidential small talk." Eleanor Roosevelt's biographer, Prof. Blanche Wiesen Cook, likewise noted: "The Delanos were very proud of their lineage, which Sara could--and did, repeatedly, recite, back to William the Conqueror. The first American de la Noye

⁵⁵ "Confidential - Memo on conference at the White House with the President---August 4, 1939," Burton K. Wheeler Papers, Box 11: File 18, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT. The document was first brought to my attention by my colleague, the late Dr. Burton Appleton.

As it happens, Wheeler and Roosevelt were both mistaken about Hull's wife, Rosetta Frances Witz Whitney. She was neither Jewish nor "one-quarter Jewish." Her father, Isaac Witz, was a Jewish immigrant from Austria; her mother was Christian. In the common parlance of those who believed that Jewishness could be numerically quantified, Mrs. Hull would have been considered "half-Jewish," although she was raised as an Episcopalian. (Irwin F. Gellman, *Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995], p.25.)

[Delano], a Huguenot, settled in Plymouth in 1621...She hated, with considerable verve and in no particular order, ostentation, vulgarity, shabby politicians, the new resorts of the new rich, and virtually all races, nationalities, and families other than her own.”⁵⁶

FDR’s disturbing remark about “Jewish blood” would have come to light much sooner had it not been suppressed by a noted pro-Roosevelt historian. The file in the Montana State University archives which contains the Wheeler memorandum also contains two letters to Wheeler, dated November 30 and December 22, 1959, written by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. At the time, Schlesinger was working on *The Politics of Upheaval*, the final installment of his three-volume history of the New Deal. According to the letters, Sen. Wheeler sent Schlesinger a copy of his 1939 memorandum on the “Jewish blood” conversation with FDR. Schlesinger, after reviewing the memo, commented to Wheeler that the document “offer[s] valuable sidelights on history.” Nevertheless, Schlesinger did not quote FDR’s remarks about “Jewish blood” in any of the many books and articles he subsequently wrote about Roosevelt and his era. Remarkably, in one of those articles (published in *Newsweek* in 1994), Schlesinger specifically defended FDR against any suspicion that he was unsympathetic to Jews, and approvingly quoted Trude Lash, the widow of historian Joseph Lash, as saying, “FDR did not have an anti-Semitic bone in his body.” In an exchange of correspondence with this author in 2005, Schlesinger insisted that he had done nothing wrong in withholding the “Jewish blood” document from publication, since, in his view, Roosevelt’s statement was not antisemitic. “FDR’s allusion to ‘Jewish blood’ does not seem to me incompatible with True Lash’s statement,” he wrote. “It appears to me a neutral comment about people of mixed ancestry.”⁵⁷

As with Harry Truman, Franklin Roosevelt’s feelings did not preclude him from having individual Jews as friends, advisers, or cabinet members. (Nor did Sara Roosevelt’s opinions prevent her from speaking at some Jewish-sponsored charity events, and on one occasion attending a synagogue service out of curiosity.) Although several Jews were part of his innermost circle of advisers, Roosevelt’s record on Jewish appointments in general was not especially impressive. Prof. Leonard Dinnerstein has pointed out: “The number of Jews employed [by FDR] in policymaking positions in the Departments of State, War, Navy, and Commerce, the Federal Reserve Board, the Federal Trade Commission, the U.S. Tariff Commission, and the Board of Tax Appeals could probably be counted on one’s fingers and toes.” There was only one Jew in

⁵⁶ Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1952), 5-6; Cook, Volume 1, pp.144-145.

⁵⁷ Schlesinger to Wheeler, 30 November 1959 and 22 December 1959, Burton K. Wheeler Papers, Box 11: File 18, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Did FDR Betray the Jews?,” *Newsweek*, 18 April 1994, p.14; Schlesinger to Medoff, 4 September 2005, copy in the possession of the author.

Roosevelt's cabinet, and only one who reached the level of undersecretary or assistant secretary. Only seven of 192 judicial appointees in FDR's twelve years in office were Jewish, which was slightly less than the comparable figure for the twelve years of his three Republican predecessors in the White House. The fate of Benjamin V. Cohen illustrates the limits to which Roosevelt's Jewish advisers were subject. Cohen was useful to FDR as one of the architects of New Deal legislation. But the president rejected a suggestion to give Cohen a seat on the Securities and Exchange Commission, and later turned down a proposal to name Cohen assistant secretary of the treasury, because of his concern that it would constitute too much Jewish representation there. He did approve a Jewish lawyer, Abe Fortas, as an undersecretary to work under the non-Jewish secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes; but having Cohen alongside the Jewish secretary of the treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr. would be going too far, in Roosevelt's eyes. FDR's personal friendship with Morgenthau, Jr., seemed genuine, but it too had limits. According to Henry Morgenthau III, the Roosevelts always maintained "a certain distance;" as an example, he noted that "in those days I could not have gone nor would [my parents] even have thought of my going to the same schools that the Roosevelt children went to."⁵⁸

As we have seen, FDR's writings in the 1920s demonstrate that he regarded Asians as having innate racial characteristics that made them untrustworthy. This provided the fundamental justification, in his mind, for the mass wartime internment of Japanese-Americans, even though actual cases of treason had not been uncovered. Likewise, Roosevelt's statements over the years about Jewish influence and overrepresentation indicate that he looked unfavorably upon what he saw as the innate character traits of Jews. In his mind, Jews were potentially "tricky" and domineering. They tended to "overcrowd" many professions and exercise undue influence. They needed to be "spread out thin" so as to keep them in check. His private sentiments shaped his overall vision of what America should look like. The United States should be overwhelmingly white and Protestant, with only a modest number of Catholics and Jews included "on sufferance." Admitting significant numbers of "non-assimilable" Jewish or Asian immigrants did not fit comfortably in that vision. A joke about "giving away" millions of American Jews was only a joke; but perhaps the reason it occurred to him at all was that he regarded Jews as somehow extraneous to the true American society.

Despite his occasional expressions of sympathy for the Jewish victims of Nazism, President Roosevelt subscribed to a vision of America that had room for only a very

⁵⁸ Leonard Dinnerstein, "Jews and the New Deal," *American Jewish History* 72 (June 1983), p.475; Joseph P. Lash, *Dealers and Dreamers: A New Look at the New Deal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 173-174, 338; William Lasser, *Benjamin V. Cohen, Architect of the New Deal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp.105-107, 182, 201; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt - Volume 2: 1933-1938* (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 317.

small number of them. Permitting any significant increase in Jewish immigration, even within existing laws and even if it would not have attracted public notice, was anathema to FDR because it would have conflicted with his concept of how American society should look. Imposing cumbersome visa requirements that disqualified large numbers of would-be Jewish immigrants during the 1930s and 1940s advanced his vision of America. Although he presented himself to the public as the champion of the “little guy,” a man of liberal and humane values who cared about the downtrodden, FDR in fact privately embraced a vision of America that was far from inclusive or welcoming.

Unlike Truman and Nixon, whose personal views about Jews do not seem to have adversely affected policy decisions that impacted Jews, Roosevelt’s views on race, assimilation, and Jewish characteristics ultimately played a significant role in bringing about his otherwise inexplicable policy of suppressing Jewish immigration far below the legal limits. Unfortunately, some historians have chosen to withhold documents, or portions of documents, that reflect unfavorably on FDR’s private views. Such actions amount to censorship of portions of the historical record, contravene accepted standards of scholarly research, and have impeded the public’s understanding of the Roosevelt administration’s response to the Holocaust.

Dr. Rafael Medoff is founding director of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, and author of 15 books about Jewish history and the Holocaust.

