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Additional Note to March 10 Chicago Tribune article

Since the publication of my opinion piece entitled "OK, President Bush, What If...?" in the Chicago Tribune on Monday, March 10, 2003, I have received several dozen responses by telephone, letter, and e-mail. The majority of these responses--perhaps two-thirds or three-quarters--have been supportive, and I would like to go on record here to thank those who took the trouble to write or call me to express their agreement with what I said in the column. In some cases, the notes were anonymous or had no return address, so I can only hope that such people will know of my gratitude from this posting. I do appreciate your support very much.

In what follows, I would like to clarify my position on some of the points that elicited the most heated and frequent opposition, and reassure some who fear that I hold pernicious beliefs. At the same time, I hope to rebut the allegations made by some who have, it seems to me, wilfully misrepresented what I said in my article.

Some interlocutors felt that my article bordered on anti-Semitism, or bluntly accused me of being anti-Semitic. For the record, let me state clearly that I am opposed to any form of ethnic or racial stereotyping or discrimination, including anti-Semitism. Neither, however, did I advance such pernicious ideas in my article.

Those who accuse me of anti-Semitism claim that my discussion of the role of individual politicians with known sympathies for the Likud (Richard Perle and others) is in some way an attack on all Jews, or reveals that I see the Bush administration's policy as "controlled" by "the Jews" or as resulting from a "Jewish conspiracy." This accusation, however, rests on a wilful identification of Likud with Jews--which is simply unacceptable. The Likud Party is an Israeli political party. We cannot equate people associated with it with all Jews, or even with all Israelis, any more than we can equate people associated with the Democratic Party with all Americans. Nowhere in my article do I state, or even imply, that equivalence, and I certainly do not wish to do so. Informed discussion of any subject demands that we keep such distinctions clear; we cannot convert one person's specifics into broad generalities without completely distorting the discussion. I was careful to refer to the Likud in particular, not the Jewish community in general, in my article.

I did state in my article that the earliest articulation of the present Bush administration war plans for Iraq, which take an overly rosy view of what may happen, seems to appear in a document prepared in 1996 for the incoming Likud government of Binyamin Netanyahu, and that a couple of the people who drafted it now serve in the Bush administration. They certainly have influence in the government--all members of an administration have influence!--but influence is not the same as "control," and I nowhere suggest that these individuals "control" the Bush administration's policy. There are other individuals in the administration (Rumsfeld, Rice, maybe others) who agree with this policy, for whatever reasons, but as far as I have been able to find, the earliest formulation of it is in the "Clean Break" memo penned for Likud by a team chaired by Richard Perle. So I think calling these individuals "Likud-oriented" is perfectly justifiable. Likud's interests are important to them--otherwise, they would not have gratuitously composed the "Clean Break" memorandum for Netanyahu's edification. [For those interested, the text of the "Clean Break" memo can be viewed at .]

Some writers attempted to associate my column with statements by Rep. James P. Moran Jr., who blamed "the Jewish community" for the Bush administration's war policy. It is, however, very misleading to compare my column to Rep. Moran's remarks, for his remarks are indiscriminate and do border on racism or anti-Semitism. He speaks of "the Jews," whereas I speak of three people in particular and their political alignment. Rep. Moran should know, as I do, that the American Jewish community is deeply divided on the Iraq war issue, and that an important segment of American Jewry opposes this war--I think above all of the courageous members of "Not In My Name," a Jewish group that was among the first openly to oppose the Bush administration's plans for a war against Iraq, and remains one of the most vocal and level-headed to do so.

I do believe, however, that certain administration neoconservative thinkers, whose record shows them to have the interests of Israel's Likud party at heart, have significant influence in shaping that war policy. They have that influence not because they are part of some shadowy "Jewish conspiracy," in the existence of which I do not believe, but because they share other views with the neoconservative camp and were for this reason invited to become part of a Bush administration that is thoroughly dominated by neoconservative thinkers.

The Friday, March 14 issue of the Chicago Tribune includes a letter from Elana Stern, Associate Director of the local chapter of the Anti-Defamation League of Bnai Brith. This letter addresses none of the facts I raise in my article, and grossly misrepresents what I say there. I never claim, for example, that "America devised the upcoming war with Iraq to deflect attention from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," as she says in her last paragraph. I invite readers to compare the text of my March 10 article, also posted on this site, with the letter, and judge for yourself.

It is striking that none of the negative letters I have received to date take issue with what I consider to be the main points of my article: that the projected war against Iraq is likely to have tragic consequences for the United States (as well as for Iraqis and many others); and that the Bush administration has been virtually silent on these possible negative consequences. The sad thing is that, despite all our debating, none of us seems to have been able to persuade the Bush administration that starting this war may prove to be a mistake of historic proportions--even if, in the short term, we "win."

-Fred M. Donner

March 17, 2003