POLITICS ON THE PERIPHERY:  
Oscar Ewing and a Special Relationship With Israel

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INTRODUCTION

On New Year’s Day, 1950, a party of American officials arrived in Israel. Less than two years since the establishment of the Jewish state, Oscar Ross Ewing led the brigade in his capacity as U.S. federal security administrator, a post that authorized him to oversee all federal matters of health, education, and social security in the United States. Although the post only charged Ewing with matters of domestic policy, Ewing interpreted his powers broadly. This visit to Israel marked the final leg of a monthlong European tour for Ewing, an opportunity for a closer look at comparative implementations of education, social security, and health care systems.

Upon arrival, U.S. ambassador James G. McDonald warmly greeted Ewing and his party at the airport. An old friend, McDonald was a former classmate from IU, where they both graduated in 1910. The close relationship of these two men indicates the value of personal relationships in the development of U.S. policy toward Israel, a theme expanded upon when focusing on Ewing and his role in the early establishment of U.S. engagement with Israel.

Oscar Ewing is a relatively unknown name within the annals of President Harry S. Truman’s foreign policy toward Israel during the 1950s, but this peripheral player made significant contributions to the development of what historians and pundits deem today a special relationship between Israel and the United States. This essay will show that Oscar Ewing in his role as U.S. federal security administrator—not a diplomat or member of the State Department—influenced U.S. policy toward Israel. Through his personal and political connections and his experience defending Jewish people against anti-Semitism in the U.S. court systems and by virtue of his own relationship with and influence over President Truman, Ewing developed a pro-Zionist attitude that shaped U.S. policy under Truman. This essay assesses the life and work of Oscar R. Ewing in order to deepen understandings of early U.S. relations with Israel, showing the strong influence of one man heretofore considered a peripheral player.
SEEKING JUSTICE

Ewing’s commitment to the Jewish people began through his experiences prosecuting two national sedition cases. In 1942, he joined the U.S. attorney to prosecute William Dudley Pelley for his anti-Semitic, antigovernment, and pro-Hitler writings (“Pelley conviction,” 1942). Ewing won the case, and Pelley was sentenced to five to fifteen years in prison (Fuchs, 1969). By working closely with this case, Ewing immersed himself in anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda in a way that most Americans never do, and this experience deeply affected him.

Ewing’s passion for this case built him a reputation for fighting prejudice toward Jewish peoples, and in 1947 he was asked to take the case of Douglas Chandler (Fuchs, 1969). Chandler was a violent anti-Semitic who broadcast Nazi propaganda into the United States during World War II (Fuchs, 1969). After the war, he was tried in Boston and was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment (Fuchs, 1969). Despite the sentence, Ewing felt that Chandler deserved worse. When remembering this trial, Ewing recalled that “I thought if there were ever to be a death sentence in any case Chandler deserved it because his propaganda was so vicious” (Fuchs, 1969).

And so, Ewing was deeply involved with anti-Semitism even prior to his appointment as federal security administrator under President Truman. These cases served as defining moments of Ewing’s career and show his sympathies toward issues affecting Jewish peoples. His role in standing up and demanding justice for the Jewish people became a pattern as his political career played out.

CULTIVATING INFLUENCE

Ewing began serving as acting chairman of the Democratic National Committee in 1946 (Fuchs, 1969). At that time, the whole country was still responding to the sudden death of President Roosevelt in April 1945. In Washington, D.C., Ewing became part of the subsequent transition to the administration of President Harry S. Truman.

Ewing quickly stepped up and assumed a greater role in the Truman administration. In early 1947, Ewing organized a policy group of influential Democrats who would meet through Truman’s term (Fuchs, 1969). The group met weekly at Ewing’s home and counseled the president throughout his administration on strategies and policies that

DEFINING “SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP”

Scholars often deem present-day U.S. policy toward Israel as based on an existing special relationship. The Jewish Virtual Library, a historical library resource created by a nonprofit organization seeking to promote positive U.S.-Israeli relations, provides a working definition of the term: a “web of military, economic, academic, bureaucratic and personal connections at the local, state and federal levels” (Bard).

My focus on Oscar Ewing considers a peripheral player inspired by his own personal sense of justice for humanity. By looking at him as a key player in this political narrative and assessing his contributions, I showcase an aspect of the early emergence of a special relationship that occurred for a set of highly personal reasons.

A COMMITTED DEMOCRAT

Ewing’s life began in Greensburg, Indiana, where he was born on March 8, 1889 (Fuchs, 1969). Ewing graduated from IU in 1910, where he studied philosophy and was a member of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity. He studied law at Harvard Law School after graduating from IU (Fuchs, 1969). After serving in the U.S. Army during World War I, Ewing practiced law in New York, eventually becoming founder and partner of his own firm in 1937 (Fuchs, 1969).

Ewing’s friendships and connections from his IU days facilitated his political career. In 1940, Ewing led the presidential campaign of Paul McNutt, former governor of Indiana as well as Ewing’s IU classmate and fraternity brother (Fuchs, 1969). McNutt aspired to be chosen as the Democratic nominee but ended his campaign when fellow Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for his unprecedented third term as president (Fuchs, 1969). To compensate McNutt for his support, Roosevelt appointed him the first federal security administrator (Fuchs, 1969). Recently created by executive order, the Federal Security Agency oversaw the offices of education, social security, public health, and welfare (ASPE, 2016).

Ewing’s leadership on the McNutt campaign did not go unnoticed and led to his appointment as assistant chairman of the Democratic National Committee in 1940 (Fuchs, 1969). This influential role with the committee would have Ewing rubbing elbows with the country’s leading Democratic politicians and set him up for significant political connections, including his initial introduction to then Senator Truman. This appointment marks a significant step in the shaping of Ewing’s political career.
administrator, Ewing oversaw all federal programs of health, education, and social security. Through this new role, along with the continuation of his policy group, Ewing became an even closer adviser and friend to President Truman. Ewing’s mounting political influence and proximity to Truman allowed him to weigh in on key political issues and influence the outcomes of U.S. policy, namely U.S. policy toward Israel.

**SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL**

As Ewing’s political career and relationship with Truman advanced, another issue weighed heavily on the shoulders of the president: Israel. After years of political strife in Palestine, Truman needed to decide whether or not the United States would recognize the Jewish state when the British ended their mandate on May 14, 1948.

Ewing had by then become an influential counselor to Truman, and it was in this capacity that Ewing would help the president make a significant foreign policy decision. Twenty-one years later, Ewing remembered that President Truman said to him, I am in a tough spot. The Jews are bringing all kinds of pressure on me to support the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state. On the other hand the State Department is adamantly opposed to this. . . . So far I have not known what to do. (Fuchs, 1969)

Ewing’s testimony suggests the extent to which Truman sought him out for counsel. Undecided on U.S. policy, the president turned to Ewing as a counselor.

In his unofficial capacity as presidential adviser, Ewing assessed whether or not to recognize the newly formed state. He researched the legalities of this issue and reported to Truman. Despite a personal and political history that suggests otherwise, Ewing claimed to have had no prior inclinations toward Zionism or Israel before beginning his study and also claimed not to have considered political implications into his final recommendation. “The study proved fascinating,” he would later remember:

Being a lawyer, naturally I investigated the legal claims that the Arabs and Jews respectively had to the land in question. I found that under international law, when land is taken by conquest, the conqueror can dispose of it as he wishes. . . . Therefore, the grant of sovereignty given by the Allies to the Jews of lands conquered
McDonald attended IU with Ewing, and the two maintained a warm, personal friendship over the years (Fuchs, 1969). Ewing’s connection to and work surrounding the Jewish state would only grow as he began making plans for a trip to Israel.

In February 1949 McDonald wrote to Ewing: “In view of your special interest [emphasis added] in Israel, can’t you find an excuse for coming out in the spring . . . ?” (Correspondence from James G. McDonald, 1949). In July 1949, Ewing responded that he was in fact “toying with the idea” of making a visit to Israel later that year (Correspondence from Oscar R. Ewing, July 11, 1949). Soon after, Washington received a representative of the Israeli Ministry of Education who formally requested technical aid from the United States concerning the new state’s sector of public education (Statement of Federal Security Administrator Oscar R. Ewing, 1950). Since the Office of Education fell under his domain as federal security administrator, Ewing had an even more compelling reason to make the trip.

Ewing’s visit to Israel concluded a tour of England, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Italy. His intentions for the trip included studying each country’s systems of education, social security, and health care in order to apply that knowledge to the same systems in the United States (Fuchs, 1969). However, the visit to Israel would involve more giving than receiving, making it notably different from the other countries included on the voyage. Ewing and his party departed for the tour on December 1, 1949, and reached Lydda, Israel, on January 1, 1950 (Oscar R. Ewing, n.d.).

President Truman had this report in his hands when he made his decision whether or not to open diplomatic relations with Israel in 1948 (Fuchs, 1969). On May 14 he made the United States the first nation to officially recognize the new State of Israel, despite, as Ewing suggested, the U.S. State Department’s opposition to this diplomatic move (Radosh & Radosh, 2009). Ewing’s opinion and discussion with Truman on the matter contributed to the president’s final decision. In this way, Ewing played an instrumental role in determining the position of the United States in support for Israel.

EWING VISITS ISRAEL

Advising Truman to recognize Israel was only the beginning of Ewing’s advocacy for the Jewish state. In February 1949, U.S. ambassador to Israel James G. McDonald invited Ewing to Israel (Correspondence from Oscar R. Ewing, February 15, 1949). Once again, an old chum from IU makes a notable appearance in our story, demonstrating the important influence of personalized networks in political life.

Figure 2. James G. McDonald portrait. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 58569.

Figure 3. Israeli president Chaim Weizmann (right) presents a Torah to U.S. president Harry Truman during a visit to the White House, 1948. Credit: Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, 59–848.
From the very first day, it is clear that Ewing’s role in Israel consisted of more than simply studying education and social welfare. He immediately became involved in high-level political correspondence. He sat down one-on-one with Israeli president Chaim Weizmann for a meeting arranged by Ambassador McDonald on his very first day in Israel (Schedule for Ewing Party, 1950). The meeting allowed Weizmann to discuss an important issue, and he requested that Ewing deliver a letter about his opinions to Truman. The letter and discussions centered on Weizmann’s growing concern of the rearmament of surrounding Arab countries and stark opposition to the internationalization of Jerusalem.

Weizmann sent Truman a follow-up letter on January 3, 1950, the same day as Ewing’s departure. In the letter, Weizmann thanks Truman for the U.S. stance with Israel against the internationalization of Jerusalem. Ewing clearly acted on this trip as a high-level though surreptitious diplomat. “In my conversation with Mr. Ewing,” notes Weizmann,

I referred to another matter which is causing us great anxiety: the large-scale rearmament that is going on in the neighboring Arab States with the help of Great Britain. Mr. Ewing will be able to convey to you some of the facts and the dangers which are inherent in these warlike preparations. It is essential that effective steps be taken to put an end to this one-sided rearmament. (President Chaim Weizmann, 1950)

Such a conversation about high-level foreign policy strays very far from Ewing’s outlined jurisdiction as federal security administrator and also from his official purpose for visiting Israel. Weizmann’s letter indicates that Ewing did more than study the problems of education in Israel. Weizmann clearly discussed this important foreign policy matter with Ewing, a notable adviser to Truman, as means of supporting his case and gaining presidential support.

Ewing’s engagements in diplomacy continued. He conversed with the prime minister and members of the cabinet at a dinner that McDonald threw in Ewing’s honor at the embassy. Ewing recalls that “Mr. McDonald gave a dinner in our honor which was attended by the entire Israeli Cabinet. Ben-Gurion was there, Mrs. [Golda] Meir, Mr. [Moshe S.] Sharrett, who was Foreign Minister. . . . This gave me an excellent opportunity to talk to them” (Fuchs, 1969). It is highly unlikely that Ewing is referring to the “excellent opportunity” to speak with members of the Israeli cabinet about the weather and more likely that the discussion involved explicitly political matters. In this way, it is clear that Ewing’s role went far beyond the confines of his role as federal security administrator and assigned oversight of education and social welfare programs.

The majority of Ewing’s diplomatic endeavors occurred on the first day of his visit, and the rest of his time was spent touring the new country. On January 3, 1950, Ewing boarded the ship La Guardia, headed back to the United States (Schedule for Ewing Party, 1950).

The implications of the information left to historians in the sources are clear. Ewing’s conversations with Israeli political officials and even his secondary observations of social welfare and education in the young state represented a means of developing the special relationship between the United States and Israel.

**LASTING IMPACT**

Ewing’s visit to Israel not only impacted him personally in the reiteration of his dedication to Israel as a Jewish state but would also contribute to subsequent U.S. policy toward Israel. Writing from Tel Aviv on January 2, 1950, still in the midst of his visit, Ewing already concluded that “Visiting Israel has been a heartwarming experience” (Schedule for Ewing Party, 1950). Even after only one day, filled with diplomatic meetings, he felt incredibly moved by the Jewish state and its people, noting an “atmosphere of pioneering here that would be recognized by any of our old-timers who saw the
Ewing’s commitment to the State of Israel is further reflected by what his visit set into motion upon his return. Keeping his promise of technical aid to Israeli education, Ewing ensured that his Office of Education would supply the assistance and that the commissioner of education, Earl J. McGrath, would make the necessary arrangements (Schedule for Ewing Party, 1950). And so, an “educational mission” between the Office of Education and the Israeli government was arranged. By early September 1950, McGrath and his team of American educators had made it to Israel for a subsequent visit of deeper inquiry. McGrath’s work would set into motion a collaboration and partnership between the United States and Israel’s Ministry of Education to develop Israel’s public education system (Education in Israel, 1950). None of this policy making and support would have been possible without the first steps of Ewing.

CONCLUSION

Oscar R. Ewing—federal security administrator, lawyer, Hoosier—created a legacy of advocacy and promotion of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Throughout his life and career, his commitment to and admiration for the Jewish people grew. His success and influence accumulated, leading to more widespread impact for his efforts as he took his advocacy all the way to the top in advising U.S. president Harry S. Truman. Ewing’s commitment to the State of Israel culminated in his visit to Israel and initiation of an educational mission, passing the torch to Earl J. McGrath, his commissioner of education. Although Ewing has been overshadowed by others in the overarching narrative of the history of U.S.-Israeli relations, his life and work present a compelling story of a man inspired by and committed to the Jewish people who embraced his role in American politics as a conduit for his advocacy. In just a few short years, Ewing furthered the bond between the United States and Israel and aided in the early development of the special relationship that persists to this day.

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Pelley conviction to discourage sedition—Ewing: Pro-Nazi agitator is found guilty on all 11 charges. (1942). Palladium-Item, August 6.


