

Arcanum in the news

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By James Kirchick

VALERIE PLAME'S REAL BLUNDER

Last week, Valerie Plame Wilson got into trouble for retweeting a vile anti-Semitic screed accusing American Jews of being dual loyalist war mongers. The problem wasn't what she was saying—similar accusations have been made by everyone from Barack Obama on down for years. The problem was how she was saying it: Unlike her allies in the progressive camp, Plame was foolish enough to implicate all Jews in advocating war with Iran, instead of simply identifying a few convenient culprits for calumny.

Plame, you may recall, became a hero to progressives when she claimed that officials in the George W. Bush administration "outed" her to Washington Post columnist Robert Novak as revenge after her husband – former Ambassador Joseph Wilson—publicly disputed intelligence that the president had cited in his case for war in Iraq. That the entire story ended up being a load of bunk didn't stop the couple from becoming liberal media sweethearts, replete with a *Vanity Fair* spread and frequent appearances at gala events and fundraisers. Plame wrote a bestselling memoir that inspired a film starring Sean Penn and Naomi Watts, and, just a few months ago, a stage play produced here in Washington, D.C.

Plame put her progressive fans in a difficult spot when, on Thursday, she tweeted out an article entitled "America's Jews are driving America's wars" to her 50,000 followers. Published on the website of Ron Unz, an eccentric paleoconservative businessman, and penned by Philip Giraldi, like Plame a former employee of the CIA, the article – illustrated with the requisite photo of a smirking William Kristol—was as anti-Semitic as its title implied. "Jewish groups and deep pocket individual donors not only control the politicians, they own and run the media and entertainment industries, meaning that no one will hear about or from the offending party ever again," Giraldi began. Having goaded the United States into war with Iraq, "American Jews," he continued, "have been very successful at faking the Iranian threat" and "constitute a cabal of sanctimonious chairborne warriors who prefer to do the heavy thinking while they let others do the fighting and dying." To mitigate this cancer at the heart of the American body politic, Giraldi proposes that Jews be barred from assuming "national security positions involving the Middle East" and that "those American Jews who lack any shred of integrity" be publicly identified in all media appearances "kind-of-like a warning label on a bottle of rat poison" or, as were an earlier generation of problematic Jews, with a yellow star.

“We don’t need a war with Iran because Israel wants one and some rich and powerful American Jews are happy to deliver,” Giraldi concluded.

Within minutes of Plame posting the article, uproar ensued. Plame initially took umbrage at the suggestion she was endorsing anti-Semitism, telling her critics “First of all, calm down. Retweets don’t imply endorsement.” The article, she insisted, was “provocative, but thoughtful” and “Many neocon hawks ARE Jewish.” She followed this with the obligatory disclaimer that “Just FYI, I am of Jewish descent” and that those criticizing her ought to “Read the entire article and try, just for a moment, to put aside your biases and think clearly.”

About an hour later, having castigated her detractors for being perfunctory in their reading comprehension and impulsive in their rush to judgment, Plame claimed that she had merely “skimmed the piece” she had, just moments ago, told her critics to read the entirety of, and “didn’t do my homework on the platform this piece came from.” This, in spite of the fact that she had repeatedly, over the course of several years, tweeted out articles by Giraldi from the Unz website, including one alleging a group of “dancing Israelis” celebrating the attack on the Twin Towers (“I never heard this story,” Plame commented) and another entitled “Why I still dislike Israel” (“Well put, Mr. Giraldi,” she concurred). In a subsequent email to *Business Insider*, Plame adopted the mien of a haplessly busy housewife, so up to her eyeballs with “8 workmen...the dog is going nuts, and kids are texting one [sic] asking for things they forgot for school” that she didn’t realize she was promoting content fit for *Der Stürmer*. Needless to say, this excuse was about as convincing as someone claiming that they didn’t know articles headlined “Black people are lazy criminals” was racist or “Homosexuals are diseased perverts” was homophobic.

Though her name may not draw the recognition it did a decade ago, Plame is not some peripheral character on the political fringe. Until Sunday, when she resigned (via Twitter), she sat on the board of the Ploughshares Fund, the non-profit organization that spearheaded the public relations campaign for the Obama administration’s Iran nuclear agreement, and she appeared in a video promoting the deal alongside other noted Middle East experts Jack Black and Morgan Freeman. Nor is Giraldi as marginal as his screeds for *The Unz Review* would suggest; in 2015, years before the term would be popularized by a paranoid American president, *The New York Times* saw fit to solicit Giraldi’s contribution to a symposium on the matter of “deep states.” While his peers wrote about intelligence apparatuses in authoritarian countries like Egypt and Turkey, Giraldi set his sights on the “Washington-New York axis of national security officials and financial services executives.”

Giraldi’s jeremiad, and Plame’s schizophrenic endorsement of it, shocked a lot of people. But it shouldn’t have. For dark insinuations about nefarious Jewish political influence, dual loyalty to Israel, and “warmongering” on behalf of a foreign country have been central themes of far right and not-so-far left political discourse for quite some time. They were staples of anti-Iraq War rhetoric in the early 2000s and more recently the pro-Iranian nuclear deal “echo chamber” created and nurtured by the Obama White House. This discourse is like a game in which the Project for the New American Century, the 1996 “Clean Break” memo, Sheldon Adelson, Leo Strauss, Alcove II at City University, Benjamin Netanyahu, and various Jewish Bush administration officials stand in for numbers on a bingo card. If Giraldi had simply replaced “Jews” with “neocons,” his piece could have been published in any number of respectable publications and Plame wouldn’t be denying accusations she’s an anti-Semite. Their mistake was being too general, castigating all Jews instead of just the Bad Jews.

The mess Plame created for herself is an illustration of what happens when you go “too far” in what’s now the acceptable pursuit of Jew-baiting, which was mainstreamed by the anti-Iraq war “netroots,” further perfected by Obama administration sycophants in selling the Iran Deal and then, in different form, enthusiastically endorsed and used by Steve Bannon and Trump during last year’s presidential campaign. Herewith is a chronological collection of comments from elected officials, commentators and former military officers along this theme:

– In October 2002, an Illinois State Senator named Barack Obama delivered a speech in Chicago opposing war with Iraq. “What I am opposed to is a dumb war,” Obama declared. “What I am opposed to is a rash war. What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and other armchair, weekend warriors in this administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne.” Few of the people listening to the speech that day could have known whom the future president was talking about. Presaging Giraldi’s condemnation of “chairborne warriors,” Obama set his sights not on the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, House Speaker, Senate Majority Leader, or Senate Minority Leader—all of whom had far more influential roles in the decision-making process leading up to war, and all gentiles – but on two Jewish individuals, one of whom, Perle, did not even serve in the Bush administration but sat on a nondescript advisory committee to the Defense Department, and who would otherwise have remained obscure had not their ethnic background taken on totemic importance in the fevered imaginations of conspiracy theorists.

– “If it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this,” Virginia Democratic congressman Jim Moran told constituents two weeks before the commencement of hostilities the following March. “The leaders of the Jewish community are influential enough that they could change the direction of where this is going, and I think they should.” Four years later, Moran told the left-wing Jewish magazine *Tikkun* that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) was “the most powerful lobby and has pushed this war from the beginning. I don’t think they represent the mainstream of American Jewish thinking at all, but because they are so well organized, and their members are extraordinarily powerful—most of them are quite wealthy—they have been able to exert power.” AIPAC was officially neutral on the Iraq War; the Israeli government, then led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was at best skeptical of the Bush administration’s plans for bringing democracy to the Arab world.

– A year later, well into a ruthless insurgency against coalition troops in Iraq, Retired General Anthony Zinni, who had just resigned from serving as the Bush administration’s special envoy to the Middle East, told *60 Minutes* that five administration officials had “foisted” the Iraq War on the country. In addition to the aforementioned Perle and Wolfowitz, he named Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, National Security Council staffer Eliot Abrams, and Dick Cheney’s Chief of Staff, Scooter Libby, all Jews. “I think it’s the worst kept secret in Washington,” Zinni said. “That everybody—everybody I talk to in Washington has known and fully knows what their agenda was and what they were trying to do,” namely, advance the interests of Israel.

– That same year, South Carolina Democratic Senator Fritz Hollings wrote an op-ed for a local newspaper in which he asked, “With Iraq no threat, why invade a sovereign country? The answer: President Bush’s policy to secure Israel.” He name-checked Perle and Wolfowitz on his bingo card, and threw in *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer as the shapers of Bush’s worldview. While these lackeys of a foreign country plumped for war out of deluded ideology,

the president's motivation was entirely cynical. "Bush felt tax cuts would hold his crowd together and spreading democracy in the Mideast to secure Israel would take the Jewish vote from the Democrats." (Hollings is well versed in this type of rhetoric, having referred to fellow Democratic Senator Howard Metzenbaum as the "Senator from B'nai B'rith" two decades prior).

– Asked by Arianna Huffington why he was sure the Bush administration would attack Iran sometime in 2007 or 2008, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander and Democratic presidential candidate Wesley Clark replied, "The Jewish community is divided but there is so much pressure being channeled from the New York money people to the office seekers."

– In a September 2008 blog post suggesting potential vice presidential nominees for John McCain, *Vanity Fair* columnist James Wolcott labeled then-House deputy minority whip Eric Cantor "essentially an unregistered Israeli lobbyist." That same month, Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt published *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. The book argues that a nebulous "Israel Lobby" controls and distorts American foreign policy in ways harmful to the United States, pushed America into the Iraq War, and incites anti-American terrorism. The book became an immediate, international bestseller.

Fast-forward nearly seven years later, towards the end of the second term of a president who had successfully campaigned on a platform repudiating the Iraq War. The dread "neocons" were nowhere in sight, far away from the reins of power. But Obama had a nuclear deal with the Holocaust-denying, terrorist-sponsoring Iranian regime to sell to the American people, one that would overturn a regional security architecture upheld by Washington on a bipartisan basis for decades, and the specter of American "hardliners" (portrayed by the president and his supporters as no less radical or ruthless than Iranian "hardliners") wrecking the accord proved immensely tempting to invoke. And so the administration and its surrogates in the media promoted a narrative that the only thing standing in the way of peace in our time was not the Ayatollah or the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, but the president's domestic political opponents.

– A *New York Times* account of a January 2015 meeting between Obama and Democratic Senators reported that, "The president said he understood the pressures that senators face from donors and others, but he urged the lawmakers to take the long view rather than make a move for short-term political gain." Robert Menendez, the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, reportedly stood up and told the president he took "personal offense" at the suggestion that his criticism of the deal was based on campaign contributions and not a good faith assessment of its costs and benefits.

– In a July 2015 appearance on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, the president assailed the "money" and "lobbyists" arrayed against his deal, "a bunch of talking heads and pundits, and folks who are not going to be making sacrifices"—the same "armchair warriors" he had warned about as a young State Senator back in Chicago. During a conference call with supporters, Obama characterized opponents as "the same columnists and former elected, former administration officials that were responsible for us getting into the Iraq war and were making these exact same claims back in 2002, 2003, with respect to Iraq." (Presumably he didn't mean Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, who both voted for the Iraq War). At a press conference the following month, Obama urged the American people to support a policy

towards Iran “not based on lobbying but based on what’s in the national interest of the United States of America,” a fairly explicit allegation that those who opposed his deal were acting “in the national interest” of another country. Lest there be any confusion as to what country he was speaking of, in a speech at American University, Obama declared that “it would be an abrogation of my constitutional duty to act against my best judgment simply because it causes temporary friction with a dear friend and ally,” Israel.

– When news broke that Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer would announce his opposition to the deal, Reza Aslan, Ploughshares “advisor” and board member of the National Iranian American Council, asked “How much Senator can AIPAC buy?” Reza Marashi, NIAC research director, accused Schumer of “putting #Israel’s interests ahead of America’s interests.”

– Laura Rozen, a progressive national security reporter who collaborated with Plame on her memoir, criticized one opponent of the Iran deal, an employee of an American think tank, by stating that, “I do not think Israel is being well served by people they have picked on U.S. side to promote their talking points.” Rozen, for what it’s worth, is as reliable a purveyor of Tehran’s talking points as anyone in Washington.

– After 47 Republican Senators wrote an open letter to Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini warning him that a future Republican president might abrogate any agreement not ratified by Congress, the progressive pressure group MoveOn labeled them “47 traitors.” CREDO Action, another such organization, popularized the hashtag #warmongerchuck on Twitter, and circulated an image of Menendez with “WARMONGER” stamped on his forehead.

– My former Yale professor David Bromwich, a brilliant scholar of Edmund Burke and a one-note conspiracy theorist on American foreign policy, penned a piece for the *Huffington Post* attacking “Netanyahu and his Marionettes” who “are good at nothing except starting wars.”

– Regarding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s opposition to Obama’s Iran deal, *The New York Times* editorial board condemned the “unseemly spectacle of lawmakers siding with a foreign leader against their own commander in chief,” a line of attack one cannot imagine them using to describe, say, Democratic congressman siding with Angela Merkel over Donald Trump on the issues of refugees or the Paris climate pact.

– When an organization headed by the gentile former Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton ran an ad attacking Kentucky Senator Rand Paul for his support for the deal, MSNBC host Chris Matthews launched a tirade attacking “piggish money people.” “There’s a rotten crowd out there that is very hawkish in the Republican Party,” said Matthews. “It wants to fight more wars, they want to do more regime change, more nation building ... This is a continual effort to knock countries apart to create instability and chaos and then say we’re gonna create Western-style pro-Israeli democracies.”

– After Democratic Senator Benjamin Cardin voted against the deal, Ploughshares Fund President Joe Cirincione tweeted his disgust that the Maryland Democrat had “caved to the neocon, pro-war camp.” Last July, he tweeted that “A neocon network lied us into war with Iraq and tried to lie us into war with Iran.”

– *The New York Times* produced a list of lawmakers who opposed the deal, identifying those who were Jewish, a

feature it later withdrew. Ironically, the list of Jews was the self-professed idea of *Times* deputy Washington editor Jonathan Weisman, who less than a year later would pen a column expressing his horror at the anti-Semitism of online Trump supporters, and for all intents and purposes has since joined the #Resistance.

Given this lineage, Plame's mistake was not so much what she said but how she said it. Most of the individuals cited above had the political nous to avoid categorical statements about Jews. Jim Moran made sure to note that AIPAC "did not represent the mainstream of American Jewish thinking at all." Wesley Clark insisted, "the Jewish community is divided" between peace-loving Jews and the "New York money people." When John Mearsheimer delivered a speech in 2010 divvying up American Jews between the "New Afrikaners" like then-Anti Defamation League head Abe Foxman, *The New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens and *Washington Post* editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, who "will support Israel even if it is an apartheid state," and "Righteous Jews" like Noam Chomsky, Philip Weiss and Richard Falk who "believe that self-determination applies to Palestinians as well as Jews," his reputation did not take a major hit. Mainstream news outlets did not stop soliciting his opinions on major international events or bromides blaming "the West" for Russia's rape of Ukraine.

Consider the response to Plame from Ishaan Tharoor, resident *tier mondiste* of the *Washington Post*. "Couching your critique of neocons on their supposed Jewishness is the single dumbest critique possible," he tweeted. "It also absurdly ignores the countless US Jews who oppose neocons and are on frontlines of progressive foreign policy." Tharoor didn't take issue with the substance of Plame's critique so much as its breadth; she went after all Jews instead of singling out the Bad Jews, the "neocons," against whom charges of dual loyalty and the like are presumably applicable. And the ability to choose who sits on which side of the Good Jew/Bad Jew dichotomy is one which "progressives" uniquely possess.

Accusations of dual loyalty have trailed Jews for centuries all over the world. But since 9/11 in particular, it has become increasingly acceptable for mainstream figures and institutions, up to and including the President of the United States, to impugn the national allegiance of Jewish American legislators, officials, writers, activists and ordinary citizens. Progressives patting themselves on the back for condemning Plame's obvious and unvarnished anti-Semitism might reflect upon how they've been enabling such rhetoric for the past 16 years.