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Op-ed: Who Threw Israel Under the Bus?
By Efraim Halevy
The New York Times
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ON Monday, in their final debate, Mitt Romney denounced President Obama for creating "tension" and "turmoil" with Israel and chided him for having "skipped Israel" during his travels in the Middle East. Throughout the campaign, Mr. Romney has repeatedly accused Mr. Obama of having "thrown allies like Israel under the bus."

But history tells a different story. Indeed, whenever the United States has put serious, sustained pressure on Israel's leaders — from the 1950s on — it has come from Republican presidents, not Democratic ones. This was particularly true under Mr. Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush.

Just one week before the Iraq war began in March 2003, Mr. Bush was still struggling to form a broad international coalition to oust Saddam Hussein. Unlike in the 1991 Persian Gulf war, Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, decided to opt out, meaning that the United Nations could not provide formal legitimacy for a war against Mr. Hussein. Britain was almost alone in aligning itself with America, and Prime Minister Tony Blair's support was deemed crucial in Washington.

Just as the British Parliament was about to approve the joint venture, a group of Mr. Blair's Labour Party colleagues threatened to revolt, demanding Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in exchange for their support for the Iraq invasion. This demand could have scuttled the war effort, and there was only one way that British support could be maintained: Mr. Bush would have to declare that the "road map" for Middle East peace, a proposal drafted early in his administration, was the formal policy of the United States.

Israel's prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, had been vehemently opposed to the road map, which contained several "red lines" that he refused to accept, including a stipulation that the future status of Jerusalem would be determined by "a negotiated resolution" taking into account "the political and religious concerns of both sides." This wording implied a possible end to Israel's sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, which has been under Israeli control since 1967.

On March 13, 2003, senior Israeli officials were summarily informed that the United States would publicly adopt the draft road map as its policy. Washington made it clear to us that on the eve of a war, Israel was expected to refrain from criticizing the American policy and also to ensure that its sympathizers got the message.

The United States insisted that the road map be approved without any changes, saying Israel's concerns would be addressed later. At a long and tense cabinet debate I attended in May 2003, Mr. Sharon reluctantly asked his ministers to accept Washington's demand. Benjamin Netanyahu, then the finance minister, disagreed, and he abstained during the vote on the cabinet resolution, which eventually passed.

From that point on, the road map, including the language on Jerusalem, became the policy bible for America, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. Not only was Israel strong-armed by a Republican president, but it was also compelled to simply acquiesce and swallow the bitterest of pills.

Three years later, the Bush administration again pressured Israel into supporting a policy that ran counter to its interests. In early 2006, the terrorist group Hamas ran candidates in the Palestinian legislative

elections. Israel had been adamant that no leader could campaign with a gun in his belt; the Palestinian party Fatah opposed Hamas's participation, too. But the White House would have none of this; it pushed Fatah to allow Hamas candidates to run, and pressured Israel into allowing voting for Hamas — even in parts of East Jerusalem.

After Hamas won a clear majority, Washington sought to train Fatah forces to crush it militarily in the Gaza Strip. But Hamas pre-empted this scheme by taking control of Gaza in 2007, and the Palestinians have been ideologically and territorially divided ever since.

Despite the Republican Party's shrill campaign rhetoric on Israel, no Democratic president has ever strong-armed Israel on any key national security issue. In the 1956 Suez Crisis, it was a Republican, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who joined the Soviet Union in forcing Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula after a joint Israeli-British-French attack on Egypt.

In 1991, when Iraqi Scud missiles rained down on Tel Aviv, the administration of the first President Bush urged Israel not to strike back so as to preserve the coalition of Arab states fighting Iraq. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir resisted his security chiefs' recommendation to retaliate and bowed to American demands as his citizens reached for their gas masks.

After the war, Mr. Shamir agreed to go to Madrid for a Middle East peace conference set up by Secretary of State James A. Baker III. Fearful that Mr. Shamir would be intransigent at the negotiating table, the White House pressured him by withholding $10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel, causing us serious economic problems. The eventual result was Mr. Shamir's political downfall. The man who had saved Mr. Bush's grand coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1991 was "thrown under the bus."

In all of these instances, a Republican White House acted in a cold and determined manner, with no regard for Israel's national pride, strategic interests or sensitivities. That's food for thought in October 2012.

Efraim Halevy was the director of the Mossad from 1998 to 2002 and the national security adviser to the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, from October 2002 to June 2003.

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