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Biden Praises Jews, Goes Too Far, Accidentally Thrills Anti-Semites



By Jonathan Chait, who's been a New York political columnist since 2011.



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What? What'd I say? Photo: Ariel Shalit/AFP/Getty Images

Joe Biden spoke last night in honor of Jewish American Heritage Month. Biden has long, deep ties to the Jewish community — Obama actually picked him in 2008 in part to reassure skittish Jewish Democrats. Biden indeed offered fulsome, heartfelt praise in his remarks, before wandering into highly uncomfortable terrain and delivering a speech that is likely to be quoted by anti-Semites for years and decades to come. (It's already the subject of excited discussion among the white supremacist community.)

Biden's remarks were not anti-Semitic. They were very, very philo-Semitic. The thrust of his largely unscripted monologue is that Jews have contributed enormously to the United States. That's obviously a standard spiel for praising any ethnic group, but Biden took care to emphasize that Jews have not just contributed their share to the United States, but far more:

The Jewish people have contributed greatly to America. No group has had such an outsized influence per capita as all of you standing before you, and all of those who went before me and all of those who went before you ...

You make up 11 percent of the seats in the United States Congress. You make up one-third of all Nobel laureates ...

I think you, as usual, underestimate the impact of Jewish heritage. I really mean that. I think you vastly underestimate the impact you've had on the development of this nation.

It's obviously true that Jews have flourished in the United States and, as Biden says, have achieved massively disproportionate representation in fields like science, culture, politics, academia, and so on.

Jews regard this fact with a mixture of pride and neurosis. The neurosis is a fear that our success will be seen as a kind of invidious control, that the broader society will at some point say, no, you have too much. Ivy League schools in the last century imposed first overt quotas, and then more subtle geographic and "character"-based admissions standards, precisely to suppress the disproportionate Jewish share of their student body. The first generation of Hollywood moguls lived in terror that they would be seen as using their control

of film to impose a particular Jewish slant upon the culture and labored endlessly to dispel any such suspicions.

It's also true that, while Jewish opinions run the ideological gamut, they have clustered heavily on the left end of the political spectrum. When you combine that fact with the fact of disproportionate Jewish representation in politics and culture, you have a weirdly shared belief among philo-Semites and anti-Semites. As Biden proceeds to laud Jewish contributions to American politics, you can see the audience go from kvelling to shvitzing:

“The embrace of immigration” is part of that, as is the involvement of Jews in social justice movements.

“You can't talk about the civil rights movement in this country without talking about Jewish freedom riders and Jack Greenberg,” he said, telling a story about seeing a group of Jewish activists at a segregated movie theater in Delaware. “You can't talk about the women's movement without talking about Betty Friedan” ...

“I believe what affects the movements in America, what affects our attitudes in America are as much the culture and the arts as anything else,” he said. That's why he spoke out on gay marriage “apparently a little ahead of time.”

“It wasn't anything we legislatively did. It was ‘Will and Grace,’ it was the social media. Literally. That's what changed peoples' attitudes. That's why I was so certain that the vast majority of people would embrace and rapidly embrace” gay marriage, Biden said.

“Think behind of all that, I bet you 85 percent of those changes, whether it's in Hollywood or social media are a consequence of Jewish leaders in the industry. The influence is immense, the influence is immense. And, I might add, it is all to the good.”

Biden's intentions here are obviously as friendly as can be, but the execution is awkward. The civil rights movement today is so widely sanctified that mentioning the disproportionate Jewish role in it is in the same category as mentioning Einstein, Jonas Salk, and so on — look at all these wonderful things

the Jews have helped bring us. Because Biden is liberal, it feels natural to segue into the Jewish role in the gay civil rights movement. (And I share his belief that popular culture has played an enormous and underappreciated role in promoting gay civil rights, among other liberal causes.)

Also, and this is a small thing, when you're pulling numbers completely out of your ass, you should probably round them off to the tens digit rather than the fives. (Jews are 85 percent responsible for changing cultural attitudes toward gays? Ninety percent felt too high, 80 percent not high enough?)

The main problem here is that gay rights, unlike black civil rights, are politically controversial at the moment. Biden may find it "all to the good" that Jews have used their influence over popular culture to change societal attitudes toward homosexuality, but lots of people don't find it good at all.

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