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M. Jansbeum

memorandum

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date August 9, 1988
to SAC Members
from Marlene Provizer
subject

Enclosed is a copy of my report on the Democratic National Convention, which has been circulated to area directors and presidents as well as to AJC leaders.

I hope you will find it of interest.





By Marlene Provizer
Deputy Director, National Affairs
July, 1988

As part of the American Jewish Committee's integral involvement in Election '88, I recently represented the AJC at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, as I will at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans. The purpose of this report is to inform you about matters of special interest to us and the implications of the Democratic convention for the AJC's strategic and programmatic concerns.

Background: As you know, the AJC has been engaged in a variety of programmatic activities in conjunction with the 1988 presidential election. Primary among these have been efforts to solicit the candidates' views on a variety of issues and to articulate the AJC's multi-issue agenda to both parties. In early February we published Presidential Election '88: The Candidates on the Issues and an accompanying summary and analysis -- the results of a candidates' survey to which all of the presidential candidates responded. In addition to holding a press conference with leading party officials and political analyst William Schneider to explore the implications of the survey for the Jewish vote; we disseminated the material widely to the press, the Jewish community and public policy influentials. More recently we submitted comprehensive, multi-issue agenda testimony to the platform committees of both parties and to key advisors on the candidates' staffs. Throughout the campaign process we have been continually assessing and providing guidelines on how best to respond to the issues raised by Jesse Jackson's candidacy. Thus our decision to mount an AJC "presence" at both parties' conventions was the natural culmination of the high priority we have given to Election '88 and the groundwork that we have been laying for AJC to play a special role in the campaign process.

Prior to the Democratic convention, we were aware that Jesse Jackson had filed the right to submit as many as 12 minority planks to the convention, including an alternative Middle East platform calling for Palestinian self-determination. Our Washington office sent out a memo to the field apprising them of the situation and urging cooperation with Jewish communal efforts to develop a process for organizing around the issue within each state delegation and to defeat such a plank if it came to the floor. With the help of the chapters, we identified in advance a number of AJC people who would be serving as convention delegates or who would be present in other capacities.

The Jewish presence: The Jewish community was well-represented at the convention--through the delegations, Dukakis' staff and advisors, The Democratic National Committee, AIPAC and community relations professionals. (In addition to myself, staff from NJCRAC, ADL and the National Conference on Soviet Jewry were present.) Among those institutions represented, only the AJC and NJCRAC are identified with a broad-based agenda, and only the AJC is a functional agency with its own concomitant programs and track record on intergroup relations. This identity, combined with our efforts throughout the campaign to assert a multi-issue agenda, enabled us to have excellent access and entré not only with the Jewish presence in Atlanta, but also with the broad network of public policy influentials who also were involved in the platform discussions.

Prior to the platform debate on Tuesday, I participated in several strategy meetings involving community relations professionals, AIPAC leaders, high level Jewish advisors to the Dukakis campaign and other Jewish influentials present. The purpose of the meetings was to exchange information, to develop strategies in response to each of the possible scenarios that might be played out, and to shore up those state delegations that might need assistance in responding to efforts organized by the Arab-Americans to advocate on behalf of the minority Middle East plank at state delegation caucuses. (My experiences in working with the Missouri delegation are discussed later in this report.)

The Platform Debate: By Monday it appeared to be virtually certain that the minority plank would be introduced and debated but not voted upon. This was confirmed by Cong. Bill

Gray, Chair of the platform committee, at a Monday morning AIPAC meeting. At that meeting, he stated his own view that the Middle East plank, as developed by the Dukakis forces and supported by the organized Jewish community, should stand, and the reasons why it should not be changed. At the same time, he told the gathering that "the issue will not go away."

Earlier discussion of a possible "compromise" appeared to be dead. This compromise, which would have involved inserting language from the Camp David accords about the "legitimate rights" of the Palestinians, posed different problems for both the Dukakis and Jackson factions. Such a compromise would have been perceived by many inside and outside of the Jewish community as a concession, and Dukakis backers were understandably wary of creating such an impression. While some factions in Jackson's camp may have been amenable to such a compromise, clearly James Zogby, his most prominent Arab-American supporter, viewed it as inadequate and insisted on pressing for a floor debate.

The discussions swirling around the Middle East plank have to be understood in the context of the overall platform negotiations. These negotiations had been moving ahead until the impasse that developed between Dukakis and Jackson over the handling of the Bentsen nomination. Although informal talks between Michael Barnes and Eleanor Holmes Norton, Dukakis' and Jackson's chief platform negotiators, respectively, continued all along, formal negotiations were resumed only after the famous Dukakis-Jackson reconciliation meeting.

As Barnes stated at a press briefing on the platform, several principles guided the Dukakis forces throughout the negotiations: the goal of unity, an unwillingness to put specific "price tags" on platform planks, and an unwillingness to sacrifice basic principles of the Dukakis campaign. Ultimately compromise language was agreed to on nine planks, with only the taxation, "first (nuclear) strike" and the Palestinian issues unresolved. Insofar as the rest of the platform is concerned, no other issues affecting the Jewish community surfaced as matters of controversy. The discord that had surfaced at previous conventions over issues such as affirmative action and anti-Semitism were averted through the careful platform drafting process.

When questioned at the press briefing by a reporter as to why Dukakis had "refused to let the Palestinian plank come to a vote," Barnes firmly stated that it was the decision of the proponents of the plank not to bring it to a vote. "We have the votes to defeat any plank on the floor," he said, and this refrain was echoed by other Dukakis spokespeople throughout the convention. Although James Zogby and others claimed otherwise, clearly all reliable headcounts indicated that the plank would have been soundly defeated on the floor, just as the taxation and "first strike" planks were defeated.

As you know, the Palestinian plank was debated for 20 minutes on Tuesday afternoon, with James Zogby and Rep. Mervyn Dymally (a Black Congressman from California) advocating on behalf of it and Sen. Daniel Inouye and Rep. Charles Schumer arguing against it. Since the debate occurred prior to prime time, it was seen only by viewers of C-Span and those present. The general noise level made it virtually impossible for any of the speakers - pro or con - to be heard by those delegates who were on the floor. Those of you who watched the debate know that the proponents were well-organized to show support on the floor with banners, demonstrations, etc. Rep. Schumer's speech was interrupted by intermittent booing - one of the rare demonstrations of unruliness on the floor.

Two questions that continually arise are how well-understood the issues were and how deep the support for the plank was among Jackson's delegates. Some of you may have seen

the poll indicating that 70% of the delegates indicated support for a Palestinian homeland. But the meaning of that poll, in my observation and based on conversations with many others who attended the convention, appears to be complex.

My perceptions are based in part on the Monday morning that I spent with the Missouri delegation. I attended their meeting in response to a request from Harriet Woods, the Jewish lieutenant governor and head of the delegation, who had anticipated that there might be discussion of the Palestinian plank at her state delegation meeting that morning. Indeed there was, but the messages were mixed.

The racially diverse delegation of about 100 was comprised of about 50% Jackson and 50% Dukakis (mostly former Gephardt) delegates. Thanks to Lt. Gov. Woods' strong but inclusive stewardship of the delegation, the atmosphere was extremely harmonious and unified. When Gephardt addressed the meeting, with unity as his theme, he received a standing ovation from the entire delegation. The delegate who requested to speak on behalf of the Jackson Palestinian plank was a Jewish woman, one of less than a half-dozen Jews in the delegation. She was received politely, as was I. I believe that my approach of taking the "high road"—acknowledging a concern for justice for the Palestinians in the context of defending the Dukakis plank, was appropriate for the situation, and my impression was confirmed by all of the Missouri delegates with whom I spoke.

In conversation with Lt. Gov. Woods, she indicated that, if the issue were to come to a vote, the Dukakis Middle East plank would get support from some of the Jackson delegates. She also confirmed what a number of reports from other state delegations indicated — that Jackson backers were lobbying hard on the other two issues but not pushing the Palestinian plank. Jackson supporters were not monolithic on this issue. For many Blacks, the foremost issues on the agenda were what Jackson's role would be in the party and bread-and-butter economic issues. Many are indifferent to the issue or sympathetic to the Jewish community's views. Indeed, while many Black supporters of Jesse Jackson do see a Palestinian homeland as an important issue for them, much of the impetus for asserting the issue comes from his Arab-American and other white supporters. In sum, it is inaccurate to describe splits over this issue simply in racial terms.

Nor are the issues, the context, the complexities of the Middle East or the meanings behind the code phrases of "self-determination" or "homeland" well understood outside the organized Jewish community, active proponents of the Palestinian cause, or foreign policy aficionados. Based on the poll alluded to earlier, sympathy for the Palestinians extended beyond the Jackson supporters, who did not constitute anywhere near 70% of those present at the convention. It may signify that some Dukakis delegates who would have supported his view on the plank had it come to a vote maintain support for Israel, yet simultaneously are ready to express sympathy for the Palestinians. It would be premature to view the response to the poll as indicative of a diminution of support for a strong U.S.-Israeli relationship, but it clearly indicates the need for an aggressive educational and advocacy campaign by the Jewish community.

Extremism: Extremist groups attempted to gain attention to their causes at the convention, but attracted little attention from delegates or the press. Louis Farrakhan put in an appearance to denounce Jesse Jackson for "caving in" to the Democratic party. The New Alliance party, which has been particularly active in New York, advocates economic renewal for Blacks, and has allied itself with Farrakhan, held rallies nearly every day at the official convention protest site. Rev. Al Sharpton, a Black organizer who attracts extensive press attention in New York but whose approval level is low among Blacks as well as whites, made

several efforts to confront Gov. Cuomo and Atty. Gen. Robert Abrams, whom he has accused of a cover-up in the alleged rape and abduction of a young Black woman, Tawana Brawley. All reports indicate that Sharpton won no attention or sympathy from Blacks or whites in the New York delegation. The most visible presence was that of the Lyndon LaRouche forces, who were there in great numbers aggressively spreading scurrilous stories about Gov. Dukakis and circulating petitions. I am not aware of any anti-Semitic remarks made in the context of activities by any of the extremist groups present at the convention, but it is important to note that these groups are active and may pose problems in the future.

Conclusions and Implications for the AJC:

1) The Democratic party platform is strongly pro-Israel. There was no erosion of the principles or language agreed on by the platform committee and supported by the Jewish community. Neither are there any threats to fundamental Jewish security or interests in the platform overall. We should continue to articulate this view, as we have been doing since the resolution of the platform, since it is in our interests to have both party platforms take positions that we advocate on fundamental Jewish interests.

2) The Palestinian issue will continue to be raised in the political arena. The activity at the Democratic Convention is only the most visible example of an ongoing campaign by Arab-American organizations to target political leaders and ethnic, religious and civil groups.

3) The Arab-American community has gained visibility and is growing more active and adept at politics and articulating its interests.

Both 2) and 3) pose new challenges for the AJC. These include intensifying our interpretative efforts on Israel, continuing our outreach work with coalition partners, shoring up our traditional supporters, and assessing what specific approaches will be most effective with each of the various audiences we seek to address. What is called for is a broad-based effort including but extending beyond our existing networks in the non-Jewish community. AJC should take a leadership role in thoughtfully addressing the "hasbarah" challenge because of our expertise as an intergroup relations agency.

4) The Democrats emerged out of the convention with a unity that permeated far beyond the television images. However, it remains to be seen how well the unity displayed at the convention holds up as the campaign progresses. The question is whether long-time Democratic activists will perceive the promises made to the Jackson camp as a diminution of their influence, or whether the politics of inclusion is perceived as expanding the pie for everyone rather than as a zero sum game. How this plays out will surely have consequences for Black-Jewish relations, but we should be aware that this is neither solely a racial issue nor a Black-Jewish one.

5) The Jewish community cannot afford to be complacent about grass-roots political involvement. Although Jewish interests were well represented at the convention, the percentage of Jewish delegates was down from about 9% to 6% from 1984. It is in our best interests to participate fully in both parties at the grass-roots level as well as through our involvement in communal institutions, PACS, advisory capacities and other roles.

6) Interest in the Jewish vote will continue to be high. Already considerable speculation is taking place about the Jewish vote and how it will go. The AJC's role as a non-partisan agency with a history of studying Jewish voting patterns is to heighten the awareness of the press of the political sophistication of Jewish voters and to our interest in both platforms and

a wide range of issues. It would be premature and possibly inaccurate to fan conjecture by the pundits that Jackson's visibility and/or "concessions" made to Jackson will inevitably produce a radical shift in traditional Jewish voting patterns.

7) Jesse Jackson has emerged not only as the major political leader in the Black community, but also as a powerful national political presence. Mainstream Black political leaders with whom the AJC has had ongoing and close working relationships are now closely allied with Jackson. It is becoming more and more difficult to conduct productive Black-Jewish dialogue, nationally or locally, without Jewish attitudes toward Jesse Jackson being raised, even by some of our staunchest Black supporters on Israel, Soviet Jewry and other issues.

