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### **Bella Abzug, Cold War Critics, and the Middle East Question in 1970s' America**

Bella Abzug (1920—1998) was an iconic figure of sixties radicalism due to her long-time engagement in the civil rights, peace and feminist movements. As a candidate from the “Movement,” she served the U.S. House of Representatives from New York for three terms (1971-1977). In her early years in Congress, she devoted her energy to opposing US intervention in Vietnam, leading the set-the-date campaign calling for the withdrawal of American forces from Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Her indictment of US foreign policy, however, went beyond the Vietnam War, targeting the Cold War assumptions that sustained the war in Vietnam. Abzug insisted that Vietnam be “the last example of the disastrous consequences of U.S. intervention in the self-determination of other countries.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout her career in Congress, the long-term disarmament advocate strived to separate all military assistance from foreign aid to South Vietnam and other countries in order to end the US insistence on the containment of communism. Nevertheless, Abzug made an exception; while accusing the U.S. government of sending military and economic aid to the South Vietnamese

government, she strongly pushed Congress and the White House to give Israel a substantial amount of support, including weapons.

The 1970s constituted a critical moment when alternative possibilities to the Cold War seemed possible. Progressives like Abzug argued that the Vietnam War was a logical consequence of Cold War foreign policy that supported any Third World allies that could serve as a bastion against communist expansion. The left wing of the Democratic Party, often in collaboration with grassroots activists and moderate Republicans, attempted to undermine the Cold War machine; they enacted the War Power Resolution of 1973, held consecutive hearings to reveal CIA's covert actions, and cut off military assistance to US allies in the Third World. This Congressional activism grew over the 1970s, only reaching a deadlock after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Hostage crisis in 1979.

The story about the fate of 1970s' Congressional activism lacks the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Recent scholarship on 1970s' American political culture, however, has revealed how the New Right mobilized militarized images of Israel as a model for the U.S. to overcome "the Vietnam syndrome."<sup>3</sup> The Previous literature on 1960s' radicalism has pointed out the emergence of Third World leftists who paralleled Israel with other US allies in the Third World, denouncing them as outposts of western imperialism.<sup>4</sup> These studies, however, paid far less attention to a wing of "dawks," who were dovish on Vietnam but hawkish in the Middle East. The story of this wing deserves a larger attention because it enables us to know the development of a consensus over Israeli

exceptionalism in the United States in the post-Vietnam era. Using Abzug as an example of this wing, this paper unveils a lesser-known process in which a group of anti-Cold War politicians made the arms supply to Israel conform to their effort to redirect U.S. Cold War policy.

As the Vietnam War escalated, many Americans came to consider that the muddy involvement in the war without its declaration was undermining the American foreign policy ideal. Anti-war protesters suspected that the United States had been unjustly intervening in the self-determination of other peoples. When this suspicion grew in the national Congress in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the anti-war congressmen and women tried to re-establish the U.S. status as the defender of the free world. The Middle East crisis worked as a site of struggle over the direction of American foreign policy. Abzug, along with her allies, infused the defense of Israel with moral meaning by illustrating this nation as the only democracy in the Middle East so that providing arms for Israel's security could take a central role in their effort to revive American moral superiority in its foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era.

To further frame Abzug's involvement in this era, it would be useful to briefly introduce her background at this point. She was a lower-middle class child, born in 1920 from Jewish immigrant parents from Eastern Europe. Her mother encouraged Bella to embrace Jewish ethnic heritage, and her grandfather regularly took her to synagogue and helped her to be familiar with Yiddish. She lived through the years of the Great Depression and the New Deal in her largely Jewish neighborhood in Bronx, New York, where soapbox speeches for social change were daily phenomena. According to

her recollection, Abzug experienced her first political activity at the age of fourteen. She stood in front of subway stations to collect money for the Jewish National Fund that bought a vast expanse of land in Palestine. She also participated in Hashomer Hatzair, a Labor Zionist youth group. It was through this group that she learned how to work on a kibbutz and how to build a Jewish national home while being exposed to left politics, including class struggle and anti-imperialism.<sup>5</sup>

When Abzug entered the Hunter College in 1938, she joined the American Student Union, a student arm of the Popular Front and worked against militarism and the spread of Fascism in Europe and Asia. After graduation from Hunter, she entered Columbia University Law School and became a lawyer specializing in labor law. Using her talents as a lawyer and an activist, she engaged in progressive politics in Cold War America. She fought McCarthyism by defending Hollywood actors, and served as a defense attorney for Willie McGee, an African American resident in Mississippi who had received the death sentence for raping a white woman. In the early 1960s, she participated in Women Strike for Peace (WSP), a women's anti-nuclear and anti-Vietnam war group established in 1961.<sup>6</sup> During her time in this peace group, she also worked closely with men and women working for welfare rights, feminism, school reform, civil rights and other issues. The women's network she cultivated laid the ground for her election to the House from New York.<sup>7</sup>

The Vietnam War had become a focal issue of the election by the late 1960s. Moderate opponents to the war flooded to the off-year election of 1970 to bring their anti-war candidates into the national Congress. Abzug was spotlighted in this election as one of such antiwar candidates. Once

elected, she built a bi-partisan coalition with the group of anti-interventionists who challenged the Presidential authority of carrying out the war. They tried to cut off foreign aid to the South Vietnamese government and the military budget for US activities in Southeast Asia and enacted the War Power Resolution in 1973. Abzug played an important role in the congressional struggle by supporting the War Power Resolution and submitting a House version of the foreign aid bill amendment to reduce the budget for the war.

Her indictment of US foreign policy went beyond the military operation in Vietnam; it also targeted the Cold War assumption. As the tension of the Cold War intensified, American leaders, despite America's self-proclaimed role as the defender of the free world, frequently backed totalitarian governments with no trustful human rights protections for their citizens, expecting that these governments would serve as bastions against Communist expansion. Abzug called for the transition from this policy. On November 1971, for example, she said in the House, "[T]he time has come... to end our insistence on 'the containment of communism' and the attendant predominance of military assistance in our foreign programs."<sup>8</sup> Abzug and her fellow anti-interventionists urged the administration to terminate the foreign assistance to Cambodia, the Philippines, South Korea, Greece, and Turkey, claiming that dictators were in control in these countries and human rights violations were prevalent.

Particularly problematic to her and other anti-interventionists in the House and Senate was the US aid to the Pinochet government in Chile. The military junta was established by the coup of 1973

that overthrew the leftist government elected by popular election. Gathering grassroots supports, the congressional committee, with the leadership of Frank Church of Idaho, revealed the commitment of the CIA and the ITT (International Telephone and Telegraph) to the coup. Abzug joined the indictment and testified before the subcommittee on International Organizations and the Foreign Affairs on October 1973; “American aid has played a major role in creating conditions under which people are daily seized, tortured, incarcerated and even executed without any semblance of justice. If the Chilean military had not been granted some \$28 million of military aid (from the US)... they would scarcely have been so ready and capable of overthrowing a legally elected government.”<sup>9</sup>

While getting involved in the congressional effort to control the presidential war power and to decrease U.S. military aid to developing countries, Abzug pushed her colleagues and the administration to deliver generous military aid to Israel. One of her jobs in her first year in Congress was to convince the State Department to restart negotiating a longer-term arms agreement with Israel. At the core of the negotiation was the sale of F-4 phantoms that were cutting-edge combat fighters at the time. The State Department hesitated to make the contract because sending phantoms would drive Egypt closer to the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Frustrated by this reluctance, Abzug led female representatives from the B’nai B’rith Women, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the American Jewish Congress and other Jewish organizations to visit Joseph Sisco, the assistant secretary of the State Department in charge of Middle East affairs. Abzug and the other women

pressured him to restart contract negotiations with Israel, arguing that the existence of Israel depended on continued US provision of phantoms.<sup>11</sup>

The outbreak of the war in the Middle East on October 1973 strengthened Abzug's anxiety toward the fate of Israel. She continued backing military and economic aid to Israel until she left Congress in 1977.<sup>12</sup> Her support for Israel including the U.S. arms sale would not be surprising in light of her Zionist background; she was a staunch supporter of the Jewish rights of the national independence throughout her life. Also, the nineteenth congressional district of New York that she represented included a huge Jewish population. Thousands of letters and telegrams were delivered from her constituents urging her to endorse military and economic aid to Israel. For example, a man from her congressional district wrote, "As members of your district we urge you to...supply Israel with \$2.2 billion for her emergency needs. Israel is the only friend of the United States in the Middle East and merits our help."<sup>13</sup> Another letter that Abzug received after the October war of 1973 said, "Thank you for your support of the stated policy of the United States to maintain Israel's deterrent strength and to continue to transfer to Israel required quantities of aircraft and other equipment to repel attack and offset equipment supplies furnished to the Arab states by the Soviet Union."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, those conservatives who disliked Abzug's progressivism used the Middle East issue to damage her credentials as a supporter of Jewish causes, by advocating that she was anti-Israel because she was a peacenik. It was therefore imperative for her to protect herself from this kind of condemnation.

It was also unwise to be too hawkish and to alienate her supporters in the peace movement, however. This was a dilemma that she faced, and to resolve it she infused moral meaning into the defense of the State of Israel. In a remark in the House, she emphasized that Israel needed weapons only for the defensive purpose; “We must once again admire the courage, strength and determination of the Israeli people as they unite to defend their tiny nation’s right to exist within secure and defensible borders.”<sup>15</sup> Expressing a strong sense of fear that such a great country in the Middle East was going to be wiped out by the “aggressive Arabs” backed by the Soviet Union, she then advocated for the responsibility that the Americans should take, comparing the alleged international indifference to the fate of Israel with the abandonment of the Jews during WWII. In another remark, she asserted, “The American people have long been steadfast friends of the courageous Israelis, who built a great and democratic nation with the strength of a people who suffered the incredible agonies of Nazism.... We must reaffirm our commitment to that humanitarian goal and to the secure existence of Israel.”<sup>16</sup>

Abzug also stressed the difference between Vietnam and Israel to validate the arms sale to Israel by describing the country as the only democracy in the Middle East. For example, when Abzug found Joseph Sisco reluctant to the arms sale to Israel on the grounds of the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, she told him, “[T]he American people—unlike the State Department—have never had any difficulty in distinguishing between the immorality of our government’s support for a repressive one-man regime in South Vietnam and the morality of our support for the democratic government of



Israel, which is simply trying to survive and has never asked us for soldiers.”<sup>17</sup> Also, in her House remark that praised the Senate Foreign Policy Committee’s decision to cut off military aid to Turkey, Abzug said, “the Committee has made a real effort to distinguish between legitimate support to democracies struggling for survival, such as Israel, and dictatorships antithetical to all that America stands for.”<sup>18</sup>

Most of the arguments Abzug made were not new. Since the outbreak of the 1967 war in the Middle East, other liberal democrats who were “dawks” had already expressed the idea of differentiating Vietnam from Israel. Yet, Abzug was able to effectively inform her idea among both peace and women’s organizations in which she was a respected leader and had many friends. This was proved when she asked these groups to make statements against the effort made by the Third Committee of the United Nations to oust Israel from the UN body in 1975. Abzug successfully put into the congressional record public statements issued by such peace groups as WSP, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Friends Committee of National Legislation, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and by such feminist organizations as the National Organization of Women and the National Women’s Political Caucus.<sup>19</sup> The peace organizations were far from monolithic on the Middle East question and were suspicious about arms sales, but they were able to come together to defend universal membership of the United Nations. The effective mobilization of those groups in her favor was Abzug’s strength.

Abzug distrusted the legitimacy of US intervention in Vietnam and the Cold War policy that enabled the war. To stop the war in Vietnam, Abzug and other anti-interventionists in Congress designed a way of assessing the validity of foreign assistance on the grounds of the recipients' extent of democracy. This was a departure from the traditional Cold War policy in which the U.S. government helped any friends regardless of their domestic repressions, as long as they were non-communists. This newly-devised criterion of foreign aid, however, preserved the structure of counterpoising "freedom" with "dictatorship," and "democracy" with "totalitarianism," in which the U.S. and its allies were placed in the former category. This binary opposition of democracy and totalitarianism demonstrates the discursive survival of the Cold War even among some anti-Vietnam War protesters in the time of detente. Both opposing the Vietnam War and defending Israel's security were an indispensable part of recovering the US moral superiority that the Vietnam War undermined. Providing weapons to Israel was thus conforming, not conflicting, in Abzug's effort of redirecting U.S. Cold War policy during and after the Vietnam era.

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<sup>1</sup> As for doves in Congress, see Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 312–347.

<sup>2</sup> "A New Foreign Aid Bill," Nov. 4, 1971, Folder: Foreign Aid, 1971–2, Box 276, BSA papers.

<sup>3</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2005); Chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002); Keith P Feldman, "Representing Permanent War: Black Power's Palestine and the End(s) of Civil Rights," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8, no. 2 (2008): 193–231.

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<sup>5</sup> Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997); Leandra Ruth Zarnow, "'A Very Simple Sense of Justice': Bella Abzug, Jewish Radicalism, and the Legal Left from the Popular Front to the Cold War" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2010). Abzug's life has attracted many biographers: Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Bella Abzug," in *Jewish Women in America*, ed. Paula Eand Deborah Dash Moore (New York: Routledge, 1997); Judith Nies, *Nine Women: Portraits from the American Radical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Alan Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug, 1920-1976: Political Passions, Women's Rights, and Congressional Battles* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013); Alan Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug, 1976-1998: Electoral Failures and the Vagaries of Identity Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s, Women in Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 143.

<sup>7</sup> Lacey Fosburgh, "Women's Unit Bids Congress Shun War to Aid Human Need," *New York Times* (June 17, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Bella Abzug, "A New Foreign Aid Bill," Nov. 4, 1971, Folder: Foreign Aid, 1971-2, Box 276, Bella S. Abzug Papers (BSA Papers), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Testimony of Congresswoman Bella S. Abzug before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, October 11, 1973, Folder: Abzug--Notes, Memos, Statements, Legislation, Box 274, BSA.

<sup>10</sup> William B Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 88 and 128-148.

<sup>11</sup> 117 Cong. Rec. 44,424-25 (Dec. 2, 1971); Bella S Abzug, *Bella! Ms. Abzug Goes to Washington* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 272-273.

<sup>12</sup> 119 Cong. Rec. 33,352 (Oct. 9, 1973); Aid to Turkey: Remarks, Dec. 11, 1974, Folder: Foreign Aid, 1974, Box 276, BSA; Testimony of Congresswoman Bella S Abzug, Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives, June 26, 1974, Folder: Foreign Aid, 1975, Box 276, BSA.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Abzug, no date, Folder: Correspondence, Box 275, BSA papers.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Abzug, Nov. 29, 1973, Folder Correspondence, Box 275, BSA papers.

<sup>15</sup> 119 Cong. Rec. 33352 (Oct. 9, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> 119 Cong. Rec. 34770-71 (Oct. 18, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Bella S. Abzug, *Bella! Ms. Abzug Goes to Washington* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 272-273.

<sup>18</sup> "Aid to Turkey: Remarks," Dec. 11, 1974, Folder: Foreign Aid, 1974, Box 276, BSA papers.

<sup>19</sup> 121 Cong. Rec. 27249-52 (Sept. 3, 1975).