

**Presbyterians, Jews and Divestment
The Church Steps Back**

**Ronald R. Stockton
Professor of Political Science
University of Michigan-Dearborn**

**Presented to the International Society for the Study of Reformed
Communities
Princeton University, July, 2006**

**The definitive version of this article was published in
Middle East Policy
Winter, 2006
and is available on their website
MEPC.org**

The Church Steps Back

Ronald R. Stockton

“It looks as if we threw the Palestinians under the bus.”

Presbyterian commissioner

“We are deeply moved...”

Jewish leader

“Divestment is still an option but not the goal”

Presbyterian Pastoral Letter

In 2004 the Presbyterian General Assembly (GA) voted to initiate a process of “phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel” and “to make appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly Council for action.”¹ The denomination’s Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI), which had handled several divestments over the past decades, was to be in charge of this process. The General Assembly also passed two other resolutions, one that condemned the Israeli security barrier for penetrating Palestinian territory and one that criticized Christian Zionism for incorrectly interpreting Biblical texts so as to put today’s Israel too near the heart of Christian theology. The resolution on divestment called for “a just and equitable solution” to the conflict, rooted in “international law, human rights, the sanctity of life, and dignity of persons, land property, safety of home, freedom of movement, the rights of refugees to return to their homeland, the right of people to determine their political future, and to live in peace and prosperity.” It called for the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land since it “has proven to be at the root of evil acts committed against innocent people on both sides of the conflict.” It called upon the US to be “an honest, even-handed broker for peace,” endorsed the four-party diplomatic “Quartet,” and referred to the Geneva Accord negotiating plan as “a useful and practical approach” to a settlement. It called for direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. It declared

¹ This article builds upon an earlier analysis of the actions of the 2004 General Assembly and their consequences. Many topics mentioned in passing were discussed more fully in that earlier work. See Ronald R. Stockton, “The Presbyterian Divestiture Vote and the Jewish Response,” *Middle East Policy*, (Winter, 2005), 98-117.

that “horrific acts of violence and deadly attacks on innocent people, whether carried out by Palestinian ‘suicide bombers’ or by the Israeli military, are abhorrent and inexcusable by all measures, and are a dead end alternative to a negotiated settlement of the conflict.”

These resolutions were not controversial. The critical divestment resolution passed by an 87% margin. In 2005 MRTI initiated a routine process of “progressive engagement” with five companies, four of which were supporting the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, one of which had facilitated the movement of monies by Palestinian groups linked to terrorism. As of 2006, the committee had not recommended selling any stocks. Nothing could possibly have been done before 2008.

The Jewish reaction to these events was almost universally negative. Some of the rhetoric was excessive and bordered on what one observer called reflexive paranoia. Presbyterian officials described the response in terms that ranged from “hyperbole that makes it so hard to have a productive conversation” to “vilification.” A representative of the American Jewish Committee said the resolutions were “morally reprehensible” and represented “a real threat to the economic life and security of Israel.” A spokesman for the Chicago Board of Rabbis said it was a “declaration of economic warfare against the state of Israel” and that the church had become “an apologist for demented killers.” Alan Dershowitz of Harvard University said the church had committed a “moral sin” and “effectively calls for the end of Israel.” The head of the Anti-Defamation League said the divestment resolution was “offensive and distressing” and that the alleged attempt to assert “a moral equivalency” between Israel and the apartheid system of South Africa was “unconscionable.” Congressman Howard Berman and 13 other members of Congress wrote an open letter calling the resolution “morally bankrupt” and asked the Commerce Department to close down “the illegal divestment campaigns and impose the appropriate penalties.” Both party whips signed the letter.²

Many Presbyterians were stunned by the reaction. Some were offended, some agreed with the criticisms, some supported the resolutions but wanted to retain close ties with the Jewish community. The 2004 resolutions set off two years of intense activity in anticipation of the next General Assembly.

² Quotes are from *ibid.*, 104-106 and 110.

What Happened in Birmingham

In June of 2006 the General Assembly met in Birmingham, Alabama, the first time since it passed its divestment resolution in 2004. There were 26 overtures (resolutions from Presbyteries) presented to the body addressing Middle East issues, particularly involving divestment. Ten wanted to rescind what was done in 2004. Four wanted a strategy of positive investment to “promote peace between the Israeli and Palestinian people,” as one put it. One called for a Task Force to draft a new statement on the denomination’s Middle East policy, affirming the “common Abrahamic heritage” of Muslims, Christians and Jews. A few supported the 2004 vote. Key issues of dispute were the 2004 phrase authorizing “phased, selective divestment” from companies contributing to violence or profiting from the Israeli occupation, references to the illegality of the Israeli fence/wall, and the tone of the resolution, which was alleged to be anti-Israeli. There was also a “commissioner’s resolution” (not from a presbytery) to declare suicide bombings a “crime against humanity.”

The overtures were referred to the Peacemaking and International Issues Committee made up of 62 persons, half clergy, half elders. The committee was to respond to each of the various overtures and decide what to recommend to the full assembly. The Presbyterians have an open door policy for those who want to speak to an issue. Many people, Presbyterians and others, availed themselves of the opportunity to present their views. The Presbytery that includes Peoria, Illinois and the Caterpillar headquarters strongly opposed divestment. A young Presbyterian who had participated in an official delegation to Israel and the occupied territories asked, “Who will speak from behind the wall?” One elder said, “Divestment at least has caught the world’s attention, and that’s why I am for it.” James Woolsey, a former CIA Director associated with the neo-conservative movement, told delegates that the resolution put the church “clearly on the side of theocratic, totalitarian, anti-Semitic, genocidal beliefs, and nothing less.”³

There had been Palestinian Christian speakers in 2004, but not Jewish speakers. Now representatives of several Jewish groups were present representing a range of

³Ferguson, Mike. “Harsh words: Former CIA chief Woolsey sharply criticized 2004 GA decision.” www.standwithus.com.

positions. Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein of the Simon Wiesenthal Center asked how the Presbyterians could single out Israel but have no concerns about human rights violations in Rwanda or China. Professor Normal Finkelstein, whose book *Beyond Chutzpah*⁴ was sent to every commissioner, said the issue was “a referendum on truth and justice. The truth is...Israel has accumulated a horrendous record of human rights.” Judea Pearl, father of journalist Daniel Pearl, slain in Pakistan, also spoke. Jewish Voice for Peace sent two representatives, *Tikkun* Magazine sent another.

A cousin of Rachel Corrie, the young International Solidarity Movement volunteer killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza, spoke, as did Palestinian Noura Erakat, who told of the 26-foot wall: “That wall was built using Caterpillar bulldozers... equipped with machine gun mounts.” The American Friends Service Committee sent both Jewish and Arab staff members. One of the only Muslims to speak was a representative of the US Campaign to End the Occupation. The other, Salam Al-Marayati, Director of Muslim Public Affairs Council, was one of three interfaith speakers at a pre-assembly event called “Visions of Peace and Justice in Israel and Palestine.” The others were Mark Pelavin, Associate Director of the Religious Action Center of Reformed Judaism, and Dr. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. All three were later invited to speak before the Committee. There were a host of interest groups and booths. Among those present were the Israeli Coalition Against House Demolitions, Anti-Divestment Committee, Human Rights Watch, and the American Jewish Committee. Twelve major Jewish organizations (discussed below) wrote a four-page, single-spaced letter to all commissioners and advisors outlining their concerns and asking that the denomination “permanently remove this obstacle to peace.” Commissioners received large amounts of literature and email information before arrival. Those driving in from the airport were greeted by a large billboard proclaiming “Divestment is NOT the Path to Peace.”

⁴ Many quotes are from Toya Richards Hill, “Committee recommends replacing language calling for divestment.” Presbyterian News Service, June 17, 2006. Finkelstein’s book is *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

An 11-person subgroup of the Peacemaking Committee drafted a resolution, approved by the committee by a 53-6-3 vote.⁵ The writing committee decided to pull portions of those various overtures together into a common resolution to present to the full assembly. They felt they had achieved a “delicate balance” in their wording and asked that amendments be voted down. But not all commissioners were satisfied. Some were concerned that the resolution made no reference to the condition of the Palestinians. Others were offended by a reference to alleged “flaws in our process” in the 2004 vote. The concerned commissioners said the earlier vote had been quite in order. It had originated in a church session, gone through a Presbytery deliberation process, and was given the same amount of time for thought and consideration at the General Assembly as every other overture. They felt the phrase “dishonored” the careful work of the previous General Assembly. A third issue was the strong sense of pain and grievance among those who had supported the engagement process in 2004. They felt they had been ill treated by their Jewish critics. Their motives had been questioned and their character had been impugned in a most egregious way. They had been called Anti-Semites, supporters of terrorism, supporters of murder, enemies of Israel, and even supporters of potential genocide through the destruction of the Jewish state of Israel. They had heard no words of regret from the Jewish side for these excesses, which at times seemed to them to border on hate speech. They felt they had acted on behalf of their faith and out of positive motives. Now they wanted their concerns about how they were treated to be put on record. They were willing to use wording that would reach out to the Jewish community, but wanted also to affirm their own integrity. They were willing to support modifications in the 2004 wording in the interests of comity but did not want it to appear that “we had been bullied into completely backing down from our previous stand.” In the end, the wording left some feeling slighted, assaulted, and betrayed. This is a festering wound that has not been addressed.

Two amendments were proposed at the general meeting. One expressed solidarity with the Palestinians (“we remain keenly aware of the deep and chronic pain of the Palestinian people.” Another would have replaced a section expressing regret for harm

⁵[www:Pcusa.org/Les/Peacemaking](http://www.Pcusa.org/Les/Peacemaking).

caused to Jews and Presbyterians with one saying “We regret any reportage that has caused misunderstanding of the PC (USA)’s Commitment to Peace and Justice in Palestine and Israel.” Both were defeated. The amendment expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people failed by a close 237-273 vote. The reasons for this are complex but partially had to do with the threat of a minority report that would either pass or would generate a divisive debate. That report would suggest taking the matter entirely out of the hands of the MRTI committee. If it passed, it would mean that even “engagement” with arms manufacturers would be removed. Many opponents of the 2004 actions were willing to support the compromise because they saw it as a move away from the previous position. Many backers of the 2004 actions were willing to support the compromise because they saw engagement, not divestment, as the core of the existing policy and believed that would be protected. If good politics consists of getting people who disagree with each other to support a common position, then this was brilliant politics. Even its opponents supported it. What was not clear was whether it was good theology. The new resolution passed overwhelmingly at all stages, in the drafting committee, the Peacemaking Committee, and on the floor of the assembly. After debate, the body adopted the recommended resolution by a vote of 483 to 28 with one abstention.

Almost immediately, those from different positions began to represent what had happened in very different ways.⁶ It was a Rashomon moment, when reality seemed to yield to perception. Since the resolution had “balanced” 26 overtures, everyone could see or emphasize what they wanted to see or emphasize. This is the actual resolution:

⁶ Newspaper coverage mostly saw a defeat for divestment. Some headlines illustrate the pattern: “Anti-Israeli Divestment Collapses” (American Spectator); “Assembly Retreats from Israel Divestment” (Birmingham News); “Presbyterian Policy Reversal” (Chicago Daily Herald); “Presbyterians Cancel Divestment from Israel” (Jerusalem Post); “Presbyterians Reverse Stance on Israeli Divestment” (Boston Globe); and “Presbyterian Parley Poised to Drop Divestment Push” (The Forward). An article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* illustrated how difficult it was to describe what had happened. The moderator of the Peacemaking Committee said they had created a near-unanimous report, a carefully crafted “consensus,” a word that implies a shared agreement. Another person said it was a fragile, careful compromise, defining compromise to mean that “nobody got exactly what they wanted.” A third person said it was a “fragile document, which reflected a consensus” but which could be dismantled by amendments. Clearly there was strong disagreement. Source: Leslie Scanlon, “Assembly approves new divestment statement, softens language.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, July 10, 2006, pp. 5-6.

The Resolution

“After careful consideration of overtures presented, we offer the following:

“1. We acknowledge that the actions of the 216th General Assembly (2004) caused hurt and misunderstanding among many members of the Jewish community and within our Presbyterian community. We are grieved by the pain that this has caused, accept responsibility for the flaws in our process, and ask for a new season of mutual understanding and dialogue. To these ends, we replace the instructions expressed in Item 12-10 (Minutes, 2004 Part I, pp. 64-66) Recommendation 7, which reads

“7. Refers to Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) with instructions to initiate a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel, in accordance to General Assembly policy on social investing, and to make appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly Council for action.” With the following:

“7. To urge that financial investment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, be invested in only peaceful pursuits, and affirm that the customary corporate engagement process of the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investments of our denomination is the proper vehicle for achieving this goal.”

2: MRTI was instructed to “ensure that its strategies for engaging corporations with regard to Israeli and the Palestinian territories” a. Reflect the application of fundamental principles of justice and peace common to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism that are appropriate to the practical realities of Israeli and Palestinian societies. b. Reflect commitment to positive outcomes. c. Reflect awareness of potential impact upon the stability, future viability, and prosperity of both the Israeli and Palestinian economies. d. Identify affirmative investment opportunities as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank.

“3. We call upon the church: a. To work through peaceful means with American and Israeli Jewish, American and Palestinian Muslim, and Palestinian Christian communities and their affiliated organizations for an end to all violence and terror against Palestinian and Israeli civilians. b. to end the occupation. c. toward the creation of a socially, economically, geographically, and politically viable and secure Palestinian state, alongside an equally viable and secure Israeli state, both of which have a right to exist. d. To encourage and celebrate efforts by individual Presbyterians, congregations, and judicatories of our church to communicate directly and regularly with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, sponsor programs likely to improve relations among Christians, Jews and Muslims, and engage in peacemaking in the Middle East.

4. The General Assembly “does not believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should tell a sovereign nation whether it can protect its border or handle matters of national defense. The problem with the security wall in 2004 and presently, is its location.” The

GA “supports fair criticism of the security wall insofar as it illegally encroaches into the Palestinian territory and fails to follow the legally recognized borders of Israel since 1967 demarcated by the Green Line. To the extent that the security barrier violates Palestinian land that was not part of Israel prior to the 1967 war, the barrier should be dismantled and relocated.”

5. “Recognizing that the situation on the ground in the Israel-Palestine area is rapidly changing” The General Assembly “is directed to carefully monitor ongoing developments of the situation in the Middle East and to examine the policies of the [denomination]...in order to make a comprehensive report to the [2008 GA].

6. Instructs the Stated Clerk to communicate this to US officials, Israeli and Palestinian officials, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim bodies “with whom we are in communication.”

“Comment: The Assembly received twenty-six overtures pertaining to the Middle East. The recommendation is the result of the General Assembly’s honest and sincere effort to address the issues and concerns that appeared in the overtures in a comprehensive and concise document.”

End of resolution

Jewish Perspectives on the Outcome

Jewish Telegraphic Agency. This is the news service used by Jewish newspapers. They have a free daily email service that reaches many people. Their initial news item said the denomination had “distanced itself from its 2004 decision to divest from companies that do business in Israel.” The current resolution would “replace the resolution of its last assembly.” A longer story on June 19 by Rachel Pomerance headlined “Presbyterian compromise appears to please Israel divestment opponents” reported that “although the resolution does not formally rescind divestment, most took it to mean that the drive toward divestment had been stopped.”⁷ Quoting one Presbyterian delegate, “the probability that they will recommend any sort of divestment is extremely remote.” However, a pro-Israeli delegate feared that “Israel’s detractors will abuse the new resolution for anti-Israeli ends.” Another said the issue was a “battle for the soul of the Presbyterian church.” One Presbyterian said that “We’re going to be able to go back to our Jewish friends feeling pretty good about this, and I think we did justice to our Palestinian friends, too.” Pomerance noted that “most seem to be genuinely struggling to

⁷Pomerance, Rachel. “Presbyterian compromise appears to please israeli divestment opponents.” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 19, 2006.

make an impact for peace in the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many want desperately to help Palestinian Christians, whom they believe are oppressed by Israel.” A follow up article on June 21 by the same reporter entitled “Church Steps Back from Divestment” said that “Jewish groups were thrilled with the outcome” and, according to one activist, the church no longer has a will “to isolate and demonize the State of Israel.”⁸ The reporter noted that “the movement to divest from Israel is restless, constantly seeking and finding fertile ground—but so far, at least, ultimately losing in every arena.” At this point, “pro-Israel activists” believe “divestment is now beside the point.” The 2004 resolution had “jeopardized the Presbyterian ethic of fairness and deliberation” and “compromised the impartiality required” to be a peacemaker. Informing the Jewish readers of the dynamic within the denomination, the reporter noted that the church had 150 years of engagement with Arab Christians, creating ties that “bind much of the Presbyterian leadership to the Palestinian cause.”

The Anti-Defamation League. The ADL, whose Director had used harsh words to describe the 2004 resolutions, posted the announcement of the 2006 vote on their website amidst several other headlined stories: National Socialist Movement Largest Neo-Nazi Group; Sudan President Blames Jews for Encouraging Peace Keeping Efforts; National Alliance Members Charged with Hate Crimes; Wisconsin: Hitler Shrine Will not Open. Their headline was “ADL Welcomes Presbyterians Overturning Divestment Against Israel Resolution.” They noted the “acknowledgement” that the “imbalanced” resolution had caused “hurt and misunderstanding among many members of the Jewish community.” National Director Abraham Foxman said on June 21 that the ADL wanted to “applaud members of the Presbyterian Church USA for adopting a new resolution on investing in Israel.” While the earlier resolution was a “cause for alarm” it had “deepened dialogue between local Jewish and Presbyterian leaders, all of whom worked diligently and successfully to have that overture reversed.” Still, he said, there

⁸Pomerance, Rachel. “Two years after Presbyterian vote church steps back from divestment.” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 21, 2006.

“remain outstanding issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian situation that separate the PCUSA and the Jewish community which need resolution”⁹

The Washington Times. The ADL story provided a link to a Judeo-centric June 22 editorial in the *Washington Times* entitled “Presbyterians placate Israel.”¹⁰ It said the church had “revised” its policy and Jewish leaders “were content with the new wording.” A leader of the American Jewish Committee was quoted as saying the new resolution subjected Israel to the “same process as every other country in the world” and did not single it out as before. A leader of Reform Judaism said the vote “is a critical step toward removing an ugly stain on the church’s history of fighting for peace and justice.” Abraham Foxman was quoted as thanking the church for acknowledging “hurt and misunderstanding.” The story did not quote any Presbyterian official or commissioner involved in the Birmingham deliberations.

Simon Wiesenthal Center. This organization had engaged in some of the most vehement renunciations of the 2004 vote. Its press releases on June 21 and 22 praised the decision “to vacate Anti-Israel Divestment” and replace it with “proactive actions to benefit both Palestinians and Israelis.”¹¹ It was “A turning point in ending the campaign to demonize Jewish state.” They said the earlier resolution had “proved to be a huge barrier to Church unity” and the denomination had “apologized for the pain caused to the Jewish community.” The commissioner’s resolution “declaring suicide bombing ‘crime against humanity’” [summarized below] will boost the international campaign to curb what their headline called “Scourge of 21st Century.” It is “a significant step forward in the campaign to curb what has emerged as terrorists’ most deadly tool of mass terror and murder.” Clearly seeing this as a first step, they said the resolution, if adopted by others, could “create a legal tool to go after those who incite, plan, and abet such activity. It

⁹ www.Adl.org

¹⁰ www.Washingtontimes.org.

¹¹ www.Wiesenthal.com.

would further empower victims and their families to take legal action against the food chain of terrorism.”

American Jewish Committee The AJC said they “applaud” the decision of the church “to adopt a more constructive and positive approach to peacemaking in the Middle East, changing its course from its 2004 divestment resolution.”¹² They said the earlier resolution had singled out “companies doing business in Israel for special scrutiny.” Now the church acknowledged “Israel’s right to protect its citizens” with a “more constructive and nuanced approach to Israel’s security fence, which has saved the lives of untold numbers of Israelis and Palestinians.” They said, “We are deeply moved by the Presbyterian Church’s acknowledgement of the damaging effects that its previous decision had on relations with the Jewish community and welcome the church’s renewed commitment to engage in positive peacemaking efforts.” This will create a common approach to “advocating a peaceful two-state solution to the region.”

Presbyterians Concerned for Jewish and Christian Relations, a pro-Israel, anti-divestment organization closely linked to Jewish groups, headed its website story with the word “Victory!”¹³ They said the General Assembly vote was “to reverse its 2004 divestment policy as well as to withdraw its blanket condemnation of the security barrier between Israelis and Palestinians.” It expressed concern that “pro-divestment activists and some denominational officials are committed to pursuing divestment under cover of the MRTI committee as though the recent vote of the General Assembly had not happened.” They cited the statement of Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick that the action “does not overturn” divestment policy. “How one can reasonably conclude that a new policy designed to ‘replace’ a prior policy in no way alters that policy defies any reasonable interpretation of this year’s overwhelming vote.”

¹² www.ajc.org, June 21, 2006.

¹³ www.Pcjer.org.

Jewish Voice for Peace, which had praised the 2004 vote, said that the General Assembly had “reaffirmed” that vote and “did not back down” in spite of “horrendous attacks against them organized by 12 powerful Jewish mainline organizations who totally misrepresented their actions in the 2004 Assembly.”¹⁴ They described “Orwellian headlines and bad reporting” and reassured readers that the denomination “has no intention of backing down from making a powerful moral judgment about the occupation” and that they “reaffirmed their policy of using economic pressure to help bring an end to Israel’s occupation in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem.” They voted “to continue the same process of corporate engagement they started in 2004” and “reaffirmed their opposition to the portions of the wall being built on pre-1967 territory.” JVP noted that while this was a “softening of the divestment language,” the resolution also expressed the Presbyterian commitment to ending the occupation in East Jerusalem.

Three Reflective Essays Published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency published three articles trying to explain to their Jewish readers why the Presbyterians voted as they did in 2004 and why they changed their position in 2006. Two by Jews seemed to suggest that the Jewish side had overreacted in 2004 and needed to think through what had happened, what had not happened, and how they had handled (or mishandled) the matter. The Jews tried to explain that Presbyterians were not evil, and that Jews had made mistakes because of their own narrow perspectives and tendency to confront critics. The third author was a former Presbyterian Moderator whose article, “Two Years of hard work shows Presbyterians just want ‘shalom’” outlined a Presbyterian perspective.

Ethan Felson of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (a major mainstream coalition of community groups) explained what Jews had learned in the past two years.¹⁵ He said the 2006 outcome was the result of “hard work of pro-Israel activists, along with intense

¹⁴ Suransky, Cecilie and Mitchell Plitnick, Jewish Voice for Peace, June 24, 2006 (www.Jewishvoiceforpeace.org).

¹⁵ Felson, Ethan. “Fight to overturn divestment call can provide lessons for activists.” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 15, 2006.

conversations within the church.” He specifically mentioned three major organizations, The Israel Advocacy Initiative, United Jewish Communities, and Jewish Council for Public Affairs. The Jews had “rejected a frontal assault” and “didn’t form an alliance of Jews and Presbyterians to take on the church.” He said “grassroots dialogue was our approach,” involving over a dozen Jewish groups coordinating their actions. What was the approach? First, we share goals: Israeli-Palestinian peace, ending terrorism, two viable states, an end to suffering. Second, we have different narratives, pro-Israelis focusing upon terrorism as the key issue, pro-Palestinians upon the occupation. Third, while Evangelicals embrace Jews and often “see Muslims as an anti-Christ,” liberal Christians tend to “view Palestinians as powerless, virtual co-religionists whose plight is paramount.” Most are not anti-Semites. Fourth, for many in the church, power is “evil” and “The more powerful party must take the first move.” Fifth, “Experience has conditioned us [Jews] to project strength through confrontation.” Implicitly, this was not always wise. Sixth, “History matters. Justice, for us, is doing the right thing, morally and ethically. For others, justice often means alleviating the suffering of the weak.” Finally, “At the end of the day, it’s all about whom you know. We have reached out and had difficult conversations, and we were heard.”

Rachel Pomerance, a Jewish reporter for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, described her experiences covering the GA meetings.¹⁶ She said there was a “gulf of misunderstanding between Presbyterians and Jews.” A “tremendous naivete” revealed itself, extending “as much, if not more, to Jews as to Presbyterians. Each group knows little about the other, which is what made the whole issue so difficult.” While “Jews, of all people, should recognize the tribalism inherent in the Presbyterian allegiance to Palestinian Christians,” still “Jews view the Presbyterian divestment drive in maddeningly simple terms” because of “a Jewish reflex to instantly define who our friends and enemies are.” Jews know little of Christianity, “a central tenet of which is peacemaking.” There is a gap of understanding. “Presbyterians have difficulty grasping Jews’ spiritual connection to the

¹⁶Pomerance, Rachel. “For one reporter, divestment fight illustrated Jewish-Protestant gulf,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 25, 2006.

Land of Israel, while Jews struggle to understand the connection between Presbyterians and Arab Christians.”

Reverend Susan Andrews, former Moderator of the denomination, is from the social justice tradition of the church. She wrote on June 25 of how Presbyterians had struggled to reconcile two deep commitments while working for reconciliation between Jews and Presbyterians.¹⁷ The first commitment was to maintain “respectful and affectionate interfaith relationships with our Jewish brothers and sisters.” The second was to “our solidarity and love for our Arab brothers and sisters in the Middle East, a solidarity and love based on 150 years of mission and engaged ministry with Christians in the region. The sufferings and injustice caused by the occupation of Palestinian lands has greatly diminished the Christian presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We grieve just as much with remaining members of our Christian family whose lives have become intolerable, as we grieve with our Jewish Brothers and sisters who live in the fearful shadow of suicide bombers.” The 2004 resolutions “caused great pain and dismay among our Jewish partners, even as it gave great hope to our Palestinian partners—and left Presbyterians divided as a denomination.” The 2006 resolution reaffirmed the commitment to a two-state solution, and “the moral responsibility we Presbyterians have claimed to be socially responsible in investing our resources...” For two years now, we have “been in dialogue with Jewish friends and partners, listening to the expressions of concern” even as “we also have heard the gratitude and hope that our actions gave to our Palestinian Christian partners who have often felt abandoned and sidelined by the wider Christian world.” The 2006 resolution “refocuses, rephrases and reinterprets the actions we made in 2004, but it does not repudiate those actions.”

The Letter of the Twelve Majors

In early June, twelve major Jewish organizations (called here The Twelve Majors) sent a lengthy letter to the General Assembly.¹⁸ (The organizations are listed in

¹⁷ Andrews, Reverend Susan. “Two years of hard work shows Presbyterians just want ‘shalom.’” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 25, 2006.

¹⁸ “Dear Commissioners and Advisors.” A letter from 12 major Jewish organizations to the 217th General

the footnote). It was an effort to explain in a thoughtful way how Jews saw the issues. It outlined what it called the Jewish “narrative” and Jewish “memory” and explained why the resolution had produced “extreme responses.” It was a well-drafted letter, obviously reaching for mainstream Presbyterian thinking. Given the broad range of perspectives within those twelve organizations, ranging across the theological, political and ideological landscapes, it contained both progressive and non-progressive points, and sections that ranged from conciliatory gestures to reasoned discourse to minimally-constrained polemics. It is an important document that deserves a full summary:

“As you prepare to represent yourselves...we would like to reiterate our concerns” in a “spirit of candid, respectful, and direct dialogue” addressing “the most contentious issues.” In phrases echoing the progressive Christian tradition, the letter noted that “Our scriptures reveal that God created all of us in the divine image—human dignity and equality is [sic] a core value of Jewish and Christian traditions. We are all made less when the value of human life is cheapened in any way. Furthermore, our traditions call upon us to be peacemakers...Peace comes about by our labors to complete the work of creation.” They continued: “Any place in which a single human being suffers, we should suffer. There is suffering enough in the land cherished by us all. We are deeply committed to the welfare and security of the Jewish people, both in the State of Israel and around the world. But let us make clear from the outset that the plight of the Palestinians is also in the forefront of our minds. And we know that unless there is peace and security for the Palestinians, there can be no peace and security for Israelis and Jews.” Affirming Presbyterian integrity, they noted that “We know that the Christian concern for the Palestinian people, many of whom are your Christian sisters and brothers, comes from a deep commitment to the alleviation of human suffering.”

Then follows a series of arguments for why there is no partner for peace. When the Israelis made a “historic withdrawal” from Gaza, the Palestinians responded by electing a government that “rejects compromise and endorses terrorism as a means to its goal, the eradication of Israel.” While there has been Israeli “intransigence” at times,

Assembly, June 6, 2006. (www.witherspoonsociety.org/2006/three-critiques or www.enddivestment.com/latestnews). It was signed by the heads of the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Hadassah, American Jewish Congress, Jewish Labor Committee, B'nai B'rith International, National Council of Jewish Women, Union for Reform Judaism, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Jewish War Veterans.

“we do not accept that there is any moral equivalence between those who initiate terrorism and those who take defensive actions to stop it...” The leaders wrote that there is a Jewish “narrative” we want you to understand, that “history and the events of the past are a critical part of our memory and influence the ways we imagine strategy and outcomes for the future.” In 1948 Israel accepted a two-state solution but it was rejected; for nineteen years, Israel was “isolated and boycotted” and subjected to “constant attack;” The Arab League rejected Israel’s right to exist; the Palestinian National Council called for Israel’s destruction; Iran’s President continues to call for the “total annihilation of the Jewish state;” the Hamas charter rejects Israel’s right to exist; textbooks and rhetoric “inculcate negative views of Jews and too often legitimize violence.” Since these rejections are the cause of violence, it is reasonable to assume that “even after a resolution of the conflict” the violence will continue. “You can understand why we feel that violence stands as the primary obstacle to peace.”

Even though “the mainstream Jewish community and the Ecumenical Protestant community” share “a deep commitment to social and economic justice, human and civil rights, and peace” there is a “negative history.” We are “natural allies” in our commitments but “memory also grounds us,” a memory that “far too often our Christian sisters and brothers, most particularly some in the mainline Protestant denominations, have remained too silent in the face of this persistent hatred, rejection, and violence aimed at Israeli men, women, and children.” We were “startled” that some believe an “economic lever” should be used against Israel. “We believe that this policy undermines peace, promotes extremism, exacerbates conflict, damages the relationship between Jews and Christians” and “is dangerously ill-matched with our passionately shared vision of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Instead, divestment is a bludgeon that provokes extreme responses from all sides.”

The letter ends with five points: 1. Any policy that seems to discriminate against Jews “is fraught with inescapable associations.” It polarizes our communities and “provokes such a strong response in Israel and within the Jewish community that constructive Christian involvement becomes less possible.” 2. Divestment “focused solely on Israel” seems to “shamefully paint only Israel as a pariah nation.” If your policy is not “universally applied” it seems to “smack of discrimination” and implies a “double

standard.” 3. Divestment is inevitably linked to comparisons with the anti-apartheid movement. The purpose of that movement “was to delegitimize and end the Apartheid regime. It will be impossible to disabuse most Jews...that no such comparison is meant.” 4. Divestment “may well undermine willingness by Israelis to imagine peace.” While Israel is powerful militarily, “decades of terror and international isolation” have left Israelis feeling “threatened and isolated.” Remember that “the greatest strides by the Israelis have come as the result of international support.” 5. Divestment “validates and supports Palestinian intransigence” and gives the impression that “the world will allow Israel to be destroyed and Palestinian extremist dreams realized.”

The final paragraph says that while these issues, have become “divisive,” it is time to work for “reconciliation.” There are “many meaningful coexistence programs” that can move beyond “the teaching of hate and the resort to violence” Although Presbyterians and Jews “embrace different narratives that bring us to this point, we share unmistakably similar goals—two states, living side by side, in peace and security.” Divestment is a “stumbling block to all we envision collectively. Our prayer is that you permanently remove this obstacle to peace.”

A Statement by Presbyterian Officials

The General Assembly, “Knowing their decisions would be interpreted, and misinterpreted in a number of ways,” asked the leaders of the denomination, the Moderator and the Stated Clerk, to write a pastoral letter explaining what the assembly had decided and what it had not decided. The Letter was issued June 25.¹⁹ It said that “In this meeting, we saw commissioners and advisory delegates living out in word and deed their deep commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, their passion to be living expressions of Christ’s love to the world, and their eagerness to be a part of the future God intends for the PC (USA). We experienced the Presbyterian process of doing things at its best. We observed people working fairly and treating each other graciously.” Regarding Israeli-Palestinian issues they noted the following: “This General Assembly

¹⁹Gray, Reverend Joan S. (Moderator) and Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick (Stated Clerk). *Pastoral Letter on 2006 General Assembly*, June 28, posted on [www:Pcusa.org](http://www.Pcusa.org), also in a report by Jerry Van Marter, “Moderator, stated clerk issue pastoral letter on General Assembly,” Presbyterian News Service, June 28, 2006. See also General Assembly, *Frequently asked questions about the Israel/Palestine actions of the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, [www: pcusa.org/oga](http://www:pcusa.org/oga).

acknowledged that the actions of the 2004 assembly caused hurt and misunderstanding among some Presbyterians and our Jewish neighbors. However, this assembly did not rescind the previous action on divestment. Divestment is still an option, but not the goal. Instead, this assembly broadened the focus to corporate engagement to ensure that the church's financial investments do not support violence of any kind in the region." The struggle within the assembly was not harmful but was beneficial, a "healthy struggle to discern God's will."

Thoughts on What Happened and Why

What happened at Birmingham is not easily summarized. There were complex dynamics that produced a murky set of outcomes. In a sense, the Rashomon analogy, that there are multiple versions of reality, is not correct. A better analogy is that of the blind men and the elephant: there are multiple realities. Here are thirteen, some of which are inconsistent with others, all of which are true.

Nothing Happened: In terms of what was passed, not much changed. There is still a commitment to the 1967 border, a criticism of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and a criticism of the security wall to the extent that it crosses the 1949 green line that serves as the internationally recognized Israeli border. The word divestment was replaced with "constructive engagement" but the MRTI process of "socially responsible investing" for peace is still in place, and in fact was re-affirmed. Those who claim victory on this point are quite correct. Given that the term "constructive engagement" was bandied about in 2004 and that the core of the original resolution is still in place, one wonders: If that term had been used in the original resolution, would the brouhaha have occurred? Most likely, it would have, which means the real issue was not the possibility of selling five stocks, but something else.

Divestment, not: Before the vote, the probability that the church would sell any stocks was small. The two main investment arms of the denomination were opposed and even MRTI had doubts. After the vote, the situation was the same. As the denomination has been saying for over two decades, the goal is corporate engagement. Selling stocks is the

last and least preferred option. Divestment would not be considered for some years and would require the approval of the General Assembly. Support for divestment was weak before the 2006 assembly and remains unlikely in the future.

The Presbyterians backed off. This vote was a seismic shift. Call it what you will—a reversal, a stand down, a distancing--the body moved. The assembly did not repudiate, reject, or rescind its previous vote (all terms used in news reports). But in 2006 its policy was profoundly different from what it was in 2004. Some speculate that this was just a tactical maneuver to neutralize a difficult situation. Others saw what happened as a challenge to the historic social witness policies of the church. The opening sentence of part 4 of the resolution said that the General Assembly “does not believe” that the church “should tell a sovereign nation whether it can protect its border or handle matters of national defense.” This seemed to imply a limitation on the areas in which the church could offer teachings and was thus inconsistent with the theological tradition of the church, that God’s dominion extends over all of creation including the international state system.²⁰ This wording, suggested by the drafting committee, was amended by the full Peacemaking Committee but then restored by the assembly. Regardless of the impulse of the changes, the conflict over the social witness policies of the church was of great importance to the assembly, which was more conservative than those of years past.

The outcome was not surprising: Because of how Presbyterians make decisions, the outcome in retrospect was predictable. Presbyterians pride themselves in a cautious, deliberative process that tries to find a middle ground. The Peacemaking Committee had before it five options for how it could handle the diverse overtures it had received. It could approve them, approve as amended, disapprove, refer (to a future assembly or a Task Force), or answer the overture with an alternate resolution. Under different circumstances they might well have referred the whole matter to the proposed Task Force

²⁰ Some commissioners made reference to the Barmen Declaration (sections 8.15 to 8.24), a key part of the Presbyterian constitution. For example, section 8.15 states that “We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.” See “The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.)*, Part I, *Book of Confessions*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Office of the General Assembly, 1983).

but given the tensions surrounding this issues, and the extent to which the denomination was divided, it was more likely they would seek a middle ground. The center of gravity of the overtures was hostile to the previous vote. Both sides put an incredible amount of energy into the issue over the previous two years. Those who supported the 2004 resolutions put their efforts into education rather than new overtures since they had a policy in place and needed only to protect it. The new overtures came from those opposed, and, as the writing committee said in its draft resolution, their wording responded to “the issues and concerns that appeared in the overtures.” Had the Peacemaking Committee based its recommendations only on the overtures before it, the outcome could have been an even greater shift. However, they had to put into the balance the 2004 action and the courageous statements of the Stated Clerk and the Moderator in defending those actions. Repudiating what had happened before would have created yet more problems and may not have passed. The “delicately balanced” resolution presented to the assembly tried to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis. The outcome was the proverbial camel, a horse designed by a committee.

A coalition of opponents carried the day. Several elements within the denomination opposed the 2004 vote. A conservative or evangelical element is very pro-Israeli and was shocked at what happened in 2004. Another element feels that Christianity committed an offense against the Jews in the 20th century and will resist any action that might harm the Jewish-Presbyterian relationship. A third element feels that the denomination is too “political” and takes too many positions on issues peripheral to the church’s true role. There are also Presbyterian security hawks appalled by the attacks on Israel. They see Israeli violence as reactive and defensive and as part of a broader “war on terror.” All of these elements wanted to move away from the 2004 policy.

Bigger fish to fry: The Presbyterian denomination is very divided and is facing a potential schism. There are really two cultures, two narratives and two theologies within the church. One side sees the gospel in terms of essential, correct, faithful beliefs and behaviors that must be defended. They look at certain biblical passages and feel there is a Christian obligation to support Israel. (Passages often cited are Genesis 12:1-3, “I will

bless them that bless thee and curse him that curses thee;” Isaiah 55:3 “I will make with you an everlasting covenant;” and references to promised territory in Genesis 15 and Deuteronomy 11). The other side is “prophetic” in that it sees a continuing revelation of God’s gracious love rooted in radical hospitality, inclusion, solidarity, justice, and social witness. The 1967 Confession emphasizes the obligation to pursue reconciliation, “healing the enmities which separate men from God and from each other.” Believers are obligated to “pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding.”²¹ In recent years, the most angry battles within the denomination have centered on the volatile issue of the role that homosexual persons should play in the church. Both sides are passionate and relentless, with organizations that constantly push for positions unacceptable to what we might call the Big Center of the membership.²² Those on the conservative side have spoken openly of a “gracious separation” into a separate denomination. In 2006, the church had worked for five years on a report that it hoped would keep the denomination together. This was the *Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church*, which many conservatives feared would covertly permit presbyteries and congregations to ordain practicing homosexual persons as deacons, elders, and ministers. The Big Center did not want the debate on that report distracted by a bruising fight over the Middle East. They did not want a convergence of issues that might create a dynamic they could not anticipate or control. In the end, the Task Force Report passed by a slim 57% to 43% margin.²³ This margin suggested a possible explanation of why the General Assembly was the most conservative in recent memory. Could it be that social conservatives lobbied to be included as commissioners

²¹“The Confession of 1967,” *ibid.*

²² The idea of a Big Center is inspired by the writings of William J. Weston. Weston believes that the church is dominated by a cautious, conservative majority that is more interested in protecting the integrity of the community of faith than in advancing their own particular views. They will always seek the middle and may actually vote against their own preferences to protect the institutional church. See *Leading from the Center: Strengthening the Pillars of the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2003).

²³ For a helpful discussion of the Report and reaction to it, see William J. Weston, “Containing Diversity: How the Report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was Received by the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.).” Presented to the Fifth Triennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Reformed Communities, Princeton Theological Seminary, July 9-12, 2006.

and that this shifted the ideological balance of the assembly to the right? Whatever the explanation, the result was obvious. As one observer put it, “it looks as if we threw the Palestinians under the bus.” If by that, the person meant that the Presbyterians chose to put their energies into saving their denomination, and that the status of the Palestinians was peripheral to that goal, then indeed, they threw the Palestinians under the bus. In any case, the ongoing peril of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank was not addressed as clearly as the attempt to heal the relationship between Jews and Presbyterians.

The Jewish mainstream pushed aside the militants. The Jewish community is also very divided. A mainstream element is more cautious in their words and more cooperative in their approach towards other Americans. They are more sympathetic to a negotiation process in the Middle East, and are generally more optimistic in their views. The Jewish right is very different. They are fixated upon the threat to the Jewish people, domestically and in the Middle East, tend to think in terms of ancient enemies who re-emerge in different forms, and often see their opponents as pathologically obsessed with hatred of Jews. Their words tend to be very harsh. In 2004 the attack on the denomination was led by those on the right: the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Chicago Board of Rabbis, the Zionist Organization of American. Mainstream Jews decided that negotiation and good will were more likely to produce results than such attacks. They began a campaign of quiet dialogue that one described as “among the most difficult we have ever had,” and saw ten Presbyteries out of 172 present overtures asking that the resolutions of 2004 be revised. Knowing that the General Assembly uses open hearings in their deliberations, the Jewish leadership (supported by friendly Presbyterians) availed itself of this openness to bring in speakers for those who wished to hear them. The letter of The Twelve Majors reflected this new approach. As with the Presbyterians, this was an effort of the Jewish Big Center to do damage control. While that letter raised rhetoric points that progressive Presbyterians would not accept, it was presented in a way that was respectful and palatable to Christians. In the end, the Jewish community found Presbyterian voices that resonated with theirs and the Big Center of the church responded to the Big Center of the Jews with

a conciliatory resolution. This was a great victory for the Jewish side, which had put an exceptional amount of energy into persuading the Presbyterians to change their position.

The Jewish Right is still loaded for bear. Abraham Foxman put it well: While he “welcomed” the decision to overturn an “unbalanced” resolution that had “targeted” Israel and caused “hurt,” he noted that “there are still many issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian situation that separate the PCUSA and the Jewish community which need resolution.” This will not be the last time Presbyterians or others who speak for Palestinian rights be called Anti-Semites or hear harsh, confrontational words.

The Moral High Ground: Many Presbyterians who supported the 2004 resolutions were totally befuddled by the responses from within the Jewish community, seeing them as bigoted attacks or often as insincere efforts to mobilize Jewish opinion by distorting or even fabricating what was in their resolution. In fact, there was a logic to the reaction. As one person said, “A century ago, someone wrote that a Jew is an exposed nerve. We still are.” In the early 1990s the American Jewish Committee issued a study that addressed what it called the “Jewish Worldview.”²⁴ As they put it, Jews see “threat and vulnerability” in the Middle East, “peril and weakness” in the US. Pro-Israeli activists “view the US as a battlefield...an arena with friends and enemies.” There is “traditional and historic Jewish mistrust of other groups with strong religious or group-oriented commitments. The ‘historical mythos’ of American Jews sees anti-Semitism as most prevalent among conservative nationalist and religious groups...” Jews are “uniformly and by a wide margin” most concerned about African-Americans and religious conservatives, but are less concerned about mainline Protestants. The 2004 vote was a shock to Jews, coming from a group that did not fit their categories.

When Abraham Foxman and others expressed concern that Israel was being treated as “morally equivalent” to lesser states, especially South Africa²⁵ or when Morton

²⁴ Steven M. Cohen. “After the Gulf War: American Jews’ Attitudes Toward Israel. The 1991 National Survey of American Jews.” New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991.

²⁵ Stockton, *op. cit.*, 104-05.

Klein of the Zionist Organization of America said (in a statement cosigned by a supportive Presbyterian) that, “Israel is a just society and the only democracy in the Middle East,” they tapped into another element of how Jews view the world.²⁶ They see themselves as a people chosen by God to survive and to adhere, at least in their higher hopes, to principles of justice. They see Israel as a moral nation, acting upon principle, with great “restraint,” fighting an implacable, often demonical enemy. They believe the Israeli army practices what they call the “purity of arms,” and only uses its weapons when it has no alternative, for defense, and with great concern for human casualties.²⁷ This point was reinforced quite dramatically almost as the Presbyterians were gathering. When a Palestinian family was blown up on a Gaza beach, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asserted that the Israeli army was the “most moral” army in the world.²⁸ As Israelis saw it, in 2004 (and onward), they were under assault and were defending themselves. Some watching the Israeli invasion of the West Bank and the destruction of the Palestinian Authority in 2002 had a different interpretation of events, but perhaps we should remember all those Americans who insist that the United States has never fought an aggressive war but only uses its armed forces for defense, to protect innocent people, or to spread democracy, freedom and free trade. Americans and Israelis are not all that different in certain aspects of their worldviews.

From this perspective, the impact of the 2004 vote was not that the church might divest from companies supporting the occupation. Nor was it that the Presbyterians were

²⁶Klein, Morton. “ZOA President and Former Presbyterian Elder Condemn Presbyterian Anti-Israel Efforts.” Press Release, June 16, 2006, www.zoa.com.

²⁷ Ezrahi, Yaron. *Rubber Bullets. Power and Conscience in Modern Israel*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997). Ezrahi, a professor at Hebrew University, writes of a “culture war” between those who focus Israeli identity upon the higher principles of the Jewish ethical tradition and those who have an unhealthy focus upon external threat. The ethical model is illustrated by an incident during the first Intifada (1987-1993) when the Israeli army faced an uprising by a population, not armed resistance by military units. The Israeli commander Dan Shomron ordered the army to act “with restraint, self-control, and sensitivity” and “under no circumstances would force be allowed to be used as punishment” (p. 211). Ezrahi says the adoption of rubber and plastic bullets by the military for use against civilians instead of using live ammunition was a significant moral statement, in spite of the fact that in close circumstances such bullets could be lethal. In contrast, he cites a prominent American professor who teaches that “we should imagine ourselves as fighting evil...that we should feel free to hate, that we should accept the pessimistic view of world history as an ongoing war of good and evil” (p. 233).

²⁸ Olmert, Ehud. “Comments at Cabinet Meeting on Kassams and Gaza Incident—June 11, 2006.” Press Release, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [www:Mfa.gov.il](http://www.Mfa.gov.il).

allegedly undermining the Israeli economy. It was that the denomination had distanced itself from Israel on moral principle. They said they did not want to make money from a situation that involved human rights abuses or policies they considered inconsistent with their faith. That put them in a position morally separate from and in some ways above the Israelis, something very hard for pro-Israeli activists to accept. It also drew an implicit distinction between Christian values and Jewish values. (A key point of the letter from The Twelve Majors was that of shared values). The Jewish leadership seemed little concerned that in 2006 the Presbyterians left in place their “process” of potential divestment. The real concessions were that the Presbyterians affirmed a commonality with the Jews, “acknowledged” (i.e., apologized for) the pain their resolution had caused, and took a morally humble position vis-a-vis the Jewish community.

A Strategic Loss: For Israel, this is the best of times and the worst of times. They have never been stronger in the military, economic, or technological realms. But politically and strategically, they are in dire straits. They are in a swamp and cannot get out. No thoughtful observer believes that the Israeli plan for the West Bank of selective withdrawals, concentration of population, and unilateral annexation will bring peace. The Israelis are facing the reality of permanent warfare against an opponent who seems increasingly defiant and increasingly supported by much of world public opinion. The 2004 resolution sent a message from the very center of mainstream Protestantism that Israel could not count upon American support forever. It sent many supporters of Israel into a near panic that manifested itself in an aggressive-defensive attack. The fact that pro-Israel activists were pleased with the actions of the 2006 assembly says much, even though that resolution included the eighth Presbyterian statement against the occupation since the 1980s. From one point of view, what Israel needs is to be told that they have to shift course (see below the views of Tony Judt). From this perspective, having the Presbyterians themselves shift course away from that message was not in Israel’s interest.

Vague Affirmations: The 2004 vote was a moral statement against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. The strategy of Jewish activists in resisting this was to call upon a sense of fair play and balance, and ask that Presbyterians be partners with

them as well as with the Palestinians. This made eminent sense to most Presbyterians but it reduced the Presbyterian position to that mushy middle ground where they ended up with vague kumbaya-type affirmations of “peace” and “reconciliation” and respect for Jews and Christians and Muslims. Some statements in the resolution were so universalized and even handed that the message lost its meaning.

Suicide Bombing: The only statement by the 2006 General Assembly that took a position relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was when they endorsed a Commissioner’s Resolution to condemn suicide bombing as a “crime against humanity.”²⁹ Such a resolution is introduced at the assembly itself and has not gone through the normal deliberation process at the Presbytery level. It was assigned to the Social Justice Committee, not the Peacemaking Committee where it would have been considered along with other Middle East proposals. The Social Justice Committee recommended that the Assembly not adopt the resolution on the grounds that the denomination had already condemned suicide bombings and other violence against civilians. It was voted out of committee over the recommendations of the committee leadership and was endorsed by the General Assembly by a vote of 348-120-1. The resolution specified that “any suicide bombing, no matter who is the perpetrator or the target, constitutes a crime against humanity.” Noting that international law “affirms the criminality of such acts when linked to a government, it is critical that the church and the world affirm the culpability of individuals and groups that assist in carrying out suicide bombings and terrorism through financial or logistical support and that civil or military authorities who fail to exercise adequate powers of control over perpetrators and fail to take appropriate measures, be held accountable.” It called for “international judicial prosecution of all those aiding and abetting these crimes” and for action to “empower victims of such attacks to be able to bring those who plan and inspire suicide bombings to the bar of international justice.” This was clearly targeted at Palestinians and it clearly disrupted the “delicate balance” of the bigger resolution. The fact that it was passed over the wishes of the Big Center says much, and exhibits how much more conservative the

²⁹ [www.pcusa.org/LES/Social Justice](http://www.pcusa.org/LES/Social%20Justice).

2006 assembly was that those in the past. In a sense, the denomination, in its body assembled, intentionally or not, reversed course and shifted into an ideological position that was very compatible with right wing thinking in the US and in Israel.

Round three? Once a week, in their services, Presbyterians stand and recite in unison an acknowledgement that they have sinned against God and against their fellow humans. Their willingness in Birmingham to “acknowledge” that they had “caused hurt” was very much within this tradition. When a Jewish leader said the Jews were “deeply moved” by the resolution, it was a sincere and generous statement but may have over-read the nature of the action. The resolution was what it said it was, an “acknowledgment” of hurt, an expression of grief that anyone felt pain, and a hope for “a new season of mutual understanding and dialogue.” It did not constitute a reversal or a capitulation. Human actions are ultimately driven by reality and there are four realities that will shape what happens in the future. First, the Presbyterians have a long-term engagement with Palestinian Christians and the Arab world. Those ties will remain firm. Second, the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is rapidly deteriorating. Unilateral actions by Israel will not stabilize the situation or end the violence. Third, the condition in which the Palestinians live is driving extremism among both Jews and Arabs (not to mention Americans) and is serving as a major recruiting force for militants. This will escalate over time, with serious consequences. Finally, these realities are here to stay and it is unlikely that the Presbyterians will sit on the sidelines while this situation falls apart. It will be interesting to see what comes of the new Task Force on Middle East policy. And it will be interesting to see what happens at the 218th General Assembly in 2008.

A Broader Reassessment

While the focus of this paper is not upon strategic or foreign policy issues, one cannot separate the Presbyterian vote (and revote), or the intense Jewish response, from a series of other events of exceptional significance. In the year 2006 several things happened that are likely to be of long term importance in how Americans see and debate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These happened as the US struggled in Iraq and the President’s popularity ratings dipped to unprecedented lows. One development was that Michael

Fukuyama, one of the more thoughtful of the neo-conservatives, separated himself from the movement and its militant Middle East policies.³⁰ The neo-conservatives had been central players in the first Bush term. They were known for the centrality of Israeli security in their thinking, and for their determination to remove Saddam Hussein from office. Fukuyama was just one intellectual of many, but his public repudiation of his previous position appeared to be a part of a general reassessment of US policy in the Middle East.

Second, several key generals intimately involved with Middle East policy and with planning and organizing the Iraq War openly criticized the management of the war. This was not normal political sniping but was a critique from the very heart of the military leadership. General Anthony Zinni was the most significant of these, being the former head of CENTCOM, the Middle East force, and President Bush's former special envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. In various interviews, he told how General Shelton, Chair of the Joint Chiefs in the 1990s, called in all his five-star generals to discuss a book called *Dereliction of Duty*. It dealt with how the military had supported escalation in Vietnam even though they knew it was a mistake. Shelton told the generals they had not received their positions to advance their careers but to protect the national interest. If they thought a policy was wrong, they should make that clear. In the end, eight retired generals, all intimately involved at one time in the Iraq war or the Bush administration, spoke out publicly in criticism of how the war was being conducted. It was obvious the eight were not speaking only for themselves.³¹

³⁰ Fukuyama, Francis. "After Neoconservatism," *New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 2006.

³¹ McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997). The "April Revolution" of the generals, as it was nicknamed, coincided with an administration contingency plan to use carpet bombing and even nuclear strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities. Subsequent reports said the Joint Chiefs resisted these plans. (See Hersh, Seymour, "The Iran Plans. Would President Bush go to war to stop Tehran from getting the bomb?" *New Yorker*, April 17, 2006; and Hersh, Seymour, "Last Stand. The Military's dissent on Iran policy." *New Yorker*, July 10 and 17, 2006, 42-49). The July article reported that "Inside the Pentagon, senior commanders have increasingly challenged the President's plans..." particularly the nuclear option. Hersh quoted an anonymous source as saying, "The system is starting to sense the end of the road, and they don't want to be condemned by history. They want to be able to say, "We stood up"" (p. 44). The military leadership forced militants in the Pentagon to take the nuclear option off the table. General Zinni first outlined his concerns in 2004. See Tony Zinni and Tony Klotz with an introduction by Tom Clancy, *The Battle for Peace. A Frontline Vision of America's Power and Purpose* (New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 2006).

Third, two professors, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard University, wrote an essay published in the *London Review of Books* entitled “The Israel Lobby.”³² Mearsheimer and Walt are two of the most respected strategic analysts in the academic world, both close to the military establishment and both supportive of US strategic involvements overseas. (In May of 2006, the magazine *Foreign Policy* compiled a list of the most influential academic strategists. Both men made the list).³³ They are of the “realist” school that believes nations have interests independent of domestic pressures, and that they should press for those interests. For example, America is an industrial state that needs access to oil, and this need operates regardless of whether Democrats or Republicans control the White House and whether any particular ethnic lobby does or does not favor any particular policy. Their essay focused upon how a collection of groups and interests (the most prominent of which was the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) had “distorted” American national priorities and had inhibited discussion of national interests and US Middle East policy by calling those who raised such issues “anti-Semites.” They said that Israel had become “a liability in the war on terror and the broader effort to deal with rogue states.” This article provoked a wide discussion.

British historian Tony Judd commented on some of these developments in an article in an Israeli newspaper.³⁴ He argued that Israel is an emotionally “immature” or “adolescent” state that “failed to grow up.” The Israeli view of their country as vulnerable, threatened and acting in self-defense against enemies determined to destroy it is accepted in the United States but not in the rest of the world. The “national narrative of macho victimhood” has deprived Israelis of the ability to understand why others commonly compare them “at best to an occupying colonizer, at worst to the South Africa of race laws and Bantustans.” Israel once had a “strong suit,” that it was “a vulnerable island of democracy and decency in a sea of authoritarianism and cruelty...But democrats don’t fence

³²Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt. “The Israel Lobby,” *London Review of Books*, March 23, 2006, accessible online at www.ssrn.com.

³³Peterson, Susan, Michael J. Tierrey, Daniel Maliniak. “Inside the Ivory Tower,” *Foreign Policy*, November/December, 2005: 58-63.

³⁴Judd, Tony. “The Country That Wouldn’t Grow Up.” [www:Haaretz.com](http://www.Haaretz.com), May 9, 2006.

into Bantustans helpless people whose land they have conquered, and free men don't ignore international law and steal other men's homes." Israel has become what early Zionist leaders wanted, a "normal" state, "but one behaving in abnormal ways." Judt believes that "shorn of all other justifications for its behavior, Israel and its supporters today fall back with increasing shrillness upon the oldest claim of all: Israel is a Jewish state and that is why people criticize it." In other words, their critics are anti-Semites.

The suggestion that Israeli actions are "Jewish" actions (the only logic by which criticism of it could be anti-Semitic) has created great difficulties for Jews overseas. Judt (who has written elsewhere of growing up Jewish in London) is concerned that this is "a self-fulfilling assertion." If Israel is indeed "the state of all the Jews" then it is logical that hostility to Israeli policies will be hostility to Judaism and Jews. Judt believes that "Israel's reckless behavior and insistent identification of all criticism with anti-Semitism is now the leading source of anti-Jewish sentiment in Western Europe and much of Asia." This becomes a vicious cycle in which unacceptable policies generate strong criticism, strong criticism generates strident allegations of unworthy motives and the irresponsible use of ethnic name calling, which in turn generates more irresponsible reactions on the other side.

Judt believes that the root of the stridency is two fold. First, because of "the unquestioning support of the United States" Israel has developed a "lazy, ingrained confidence in unconditional American approval" that has enabled it to ignore the untenable and morally unacceptable nature of its occupation of Palestinian land. Second, the American situation is changing dramatically because "the United States has suffered a catastrophic loss of international political influence and an unprecedented degradation of its moral image" throughout the world. Its strategic analysts have realized that being "tied by an umbilical cord to the needs and interests (if that is what they are) of one small Middle Eastern country of very little relevance to America's long-term concerns" is not wise. The United States and Israel have engaged in "a symbiotic embrace whereby the actions of each party exacerbate their common unpopularity abroad." With hostility for the United States soaring, the embrace is one that increasing numbers of Americans no longer consider in their own interest. If Israel is to salvage its security, it must acknowledge that it "no longer

has any special claim upon international sympathy or indulgence; that the United States won't always be there; that weapons and walls can no more preserve Israel forever than they preserved the German Democratic Republic or white South Africa; that colonies are always doomed unless you are willing to expel or exterminate the indigenous population.”

Conclusions

Presbyterians, in their innocence—and that word has many meanings--wandered in 2004 into this explosive minefield, and found themselves subjected to a barrage of vilification and attacks that were beyond anything they could have imagined. They were caught up in a whirlwind that took the form of ethnic and religious confrontation but in a broader sense had to do with the restructuring of US strategic policy and redefining the Israeli position in the Middle East. The fact that they were two years ahead of an ideological and strategic tsunami caught them off guard and completely unaware. But what is interesting is that they were one of the first to fire a warning shot across the Israeli bow. History does not change because of resolutions in denominational meetings, but that resolution reflected a wider message, that Israel cannot count upon American support for its occupation forever. The Presbyterian General Assembly backed off from its earlier position, but the reality of world politics has not changed. This is a volatile and dangerous age, and having an American denomination step back does not change that fact. Nor will it change the reality of what is going to happen next year, or the year after that, or after that.