

Q. & A.

NORM COLEMAN EXPLAINS WHY SUPPORTERS OF ISRAEL SHOULD THANK DONALD TRUMP



By Isaac Chotiner

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The journey of Norm Coleman, the former Republican senator from Minnesota, is an instructive one. Coleman, who started his political career as a Democrat, was the mayor of St. Paul, from 1994 to 2002. He served one term in the Senate before losing his seat to Al Franken, by just more than three hundred votes, in 2008. He now works in the private sector, as the chairman of the Republican Jewish Coalition and as a lawyer and lobbyist representing the Saudi government. When Donald Trump won the Republican Presidential nomination, Coleman reacted with a horror shared by many members of the political establishment. In an op-ed published in March, 2016, titled “I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump,” Coleman called Trump “a bigot. A misogynist. A fraud. A bully.” He added, “And any man who declines to renounce the affections of the KKK and David Duke should not be trusted to lead America. Ever.”

“Ever” is a long time, but this month Coleman made headlines by leading a Passover song in praise of President Trump at the R.J.C.’s annual meeting, in Las Vegas. “Dayenu” (“It would have been enough”) is meant to give thanks to God, but Coleman replaced the Almighty with Trump, saying, “Had President Trump only passed the

largest tax cut in history—say it with me—Dayenu.” Trump also addressed the group, telling it that he supported “your Prime Minister”—the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu—days before Netanyahu appeared to win reelection, much to the delight of many conservative American Jews.

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I recently spoke by phone with Coleman. During our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed why he has changed his mind about Trump, his lobbying for Saudi Arabia, and whether a supporter of Israel can be anti-Semitic.

What is the main goal of the R.J.C.?

The main goal of the R.J.C. is to help elect Republicans who strengthen U.S.-Israel ties and promote Republican values.

What does “strengthen U.S.-Israel ties” mean?

It means supporting individuals—principally at the federal level, in Congress—who, by their deeds, by their commitments, support a strong U.S.-Israel relationship.

What does that consist of?

You look at an individual matter—for instance, the Iran deal. The deal Obama did with Iran represented an existential threat to Israel's existence. That means we would be supporting senators, congressmen, Presidents who would oppose that deal, because doing it would have and did create an existential threat to Israel's existence.

It may mean standing up for Israel at the United Nations. It has been an organization that has an obsession with anti-Israel action. The Human Rights Council, you go back historically, I don't know, eighty per cent, ninety per cent of their resolutions focus on Israel and the Palestinians. They don't focus on what is happening in Iran, or Sudan, or China. [*According to U.N. watchdogs, since the H.R.C. was founded, in 2006, more than half of its condemnatory resolutions have concerned Israel.*] Those matters that weaken the state of Israel are important to the R.J.C., because we fundamentally believe that a strong Israel is important to the U.S.'s national security.

Do you think there are areas where American and Israeli interests diverge, and how should the politicians you support deal with that?

I presume that one could have disagreements with certain aspects of Israeli policy, and so I think people, in that instance, have to make a choice as to whether that is something we should be supporting, we should be involved in.

Could be a tough choice.

Yeah, well, I mean, listen, we are Americans, our interest is American national security, and I want to reiterate our fundamental belief that a strong Israel is critical to American national security. I forget the general who said, “I don’t need an aircraft carrier in that portion of the world. Israel is there.”

But, if there’s Israeli domestic policy that one may disagree with, yeah, that’s legitimate. I don’t involve myself much with Israeli domestic policy. But, by way of example, women praying at the Western Wall—I believe that is something that should absolutely happen. In Israel, the Orthodox may believe different. [*Liberal and ultra-Orthodox groups have clashed for decades over the gender-segregated prayer sections at the Western Wall.*] We disagree on that issue. But that’s not an issue that we’re looking at as being central to America’s security and Israel’s security.

You said recently that you were “foolishly among the doubters” when it came to Donald Trump. What do you think you misjudged about him, or what do you think you were too harsh about when it came to him?

Well, I was pretty harsh. I am from Brooklyn, New York. I think I was at that point supporting Marco Rubio. But what I misjudged was his commitment to live up to his word. The issue of whether Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of Israel: that is something that has been enshrined in U.S. law for over thirty years. Every American President since 1992 has said they were going to move the Embassy. But Donald Trump is the one who promised and the one who

delivered. I misjudged the depth and the measure of his commitment to Israel's security. [*Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush said, as Presidential candidates, that they supported moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem. In 2008, Barack Obama said that "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided."*]

When you look back on the things you said, calling him a “bigot” and “misogynist,” do you think you were wrong?

Yeah, I think I misjudged the President. I think I was harsh because I was pushing something else.

“Misogynist” and “bigot” are tough words.

I'm from Brooklyn. It was a political campaign. You say tough things. But, in the end, I am measuring this President by his deeds. By the economy, by what he has done with regulation. I had a conversation about this with someone at the R.J.C. convention. And they asked me about Cyrus the Great. In Jewish history, he is praised as a great liberator. And this person asked me, “So what do you know about his personal character? Do you know how he treated his wife? He didn't have tweets, but how did he deal with folks he didn't want to work with anymore?” Of course, the answer is no, because we judge him by his deeds. In fifty years, people are not going to judge Donald Trump by his tweets or personal comments; they are going to judge him by what he did, what he accomplished.

Is saying that there were good people on both sides in Charlottesville deeds or words?

No, no, no, I have criticized him. I have criticized him where I thought his response wasn't adequate or wasn't appropriate. Do I think Donald Trump is anti-Semitic? Just the opposite. He is surrounded by Jews and has done more to strengthen the U.S.-Israel relationship than any President. I thought his response to Charlottesville was weak, and I criticized him for that. I choose in this conversation not to go into details about how he fired someone or what words he used. When I wake up in the morning, with my family—typically, American families, when they wake up, are concerned with whether Mom and Dad are going to work, is the family safe, is there an opportunity out there for them? And then, for those of us who care about Israel, that's part of the mix. We do care about Israel's security today. This President has done well.

Do you think it is important to Americans and American Jews to have a President who forthrightly condemns David Duke?

Again, I am not going to go through a litany of what he has done. I think that he should be criticizing David Duke more, but I am not going to get into judging.

When you see anti-Semites saying that they look up to the President and feel that he speaks for them, does that concern you?

It concerns me, but I don't put the blame on Donald Trump.

What did you make of Trump referring to Netanyahu as “your Prime Minister” to a room full of American Jews, the R.J.C.?

I have to laugh. Folks will take every word and say that he is saying it is dual loyalty. No. No. He could have said, “The Prime Minister of the country that you love.” A reporter asked me the same foolish question, and somehow compared it to Ilhan Omar, and I almost had to laugh, but I didn’t, because it is serious. With Ilhan Omar, you have a series of repetitious anti-Semitic tropes—dual loyalty. And, by the way, [at the R.J.C.] we have Israeli flags and American flags. We have Israeli flags. We are not citizens of Israel. And he wasn’t calling dual loyalty. I think it is absurd, Isaac, for folks to try to take words like that and somehow try to put him on the same plane with an anti-Semite, with Ilhan Omar, who has a series of repetitious tropes, and trust me, by the time you print this interview, she will have another one.

So if Ilhan Omar started going around talking about America First or not condemning David Duke, you wouldn’t say that those were signs of anti-Semitism?

I’m not focussing on whether Ilhan Omar condemns David Duke. Ilhan Omar is an anti-Semite because of the things she has said.

What did you think about her calling Stephen Miller a “white nationalist”?

I am not going to assign everything she says to anti-Semitism.

The President said that it was anti-Semitism, so I am just wondering what you thought about that.

She is an anti-Semite, but I am not going to parse or critique every word. Anyone who deals in the anti-Semitic tropes of Jews and dual loyalty, Jews buying loyalty with their money, that person is an anti-Semite.

Do you think Viktor Orbán is an anti-Semite?

Listen, I don't want to get into a quiz game here of "choose the anti-Semite." You asked me if Ilhan Omar is an anti-Semite. Absolutely. Is Donald Trump? Not even close. Absurd. Let's leave it at that. I am not going down that path.

Are you worried about the rise of right-wing anti-Semitism in Europe?

I am deeply worried about the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. And I am deeply worried about things I see going on in Hungary, in France.

Netanyahu called Viktor Orbán a "true friend of Israel." How does that relate to what you were saying earlier about people being a friend to Israel being evidence of someone not being anti-Semitic?

I can't respond. To be honest, I just haven't looked at that or studied it.

What are you doing with the government of Saudi Arabia?

They are a client of the firm, and I represent them.

Has that changed since the Khashoggi murder?

It hasn't changed the representation, no.

Are you concerned about the direction of Saudi Arabia?

They are my client, and I work for them.

You were talking about the U.N. Human Rights—

The strategic relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is a critical strategic relationship for our security. And, by the way, that also impacts Israel. The enemy in that area of the world is Iran. I am very proud of the work I have done to try to check the spread of Iranian influence in that area, and my work for the kingdom touches upon that to a great degree. I will leave it at that.

When did you get into politics?

I was treasurer in sixth grade, president of my college, president of my law-school class. I got elected mayor of St. Paul in 1993. I have been involved in public service for over thirty-five years.

Were you always idealistic about politics?

Yeah. I don't think I have changed.

If you think back to sixth grade, or being mayor, and you look to 2019, where you are today, what do you think your young self would say about your journey?

I don't think that I have changed that much. I certainly am more, you

know, after I got a job, I started worrying about a mortgage and taxes, but I am still idealistic. I am still hoping, I still root for the better angels, I am still idealistic. On some things, I don't know if the values have changed, but obviously issues of security are more important to me now—economic security, personal security are certainly more important now than before. The importance of being able to earn a living and being able to take care of my family are things you didn't worry about when you are nineteen or twenty. I just came through chemo, radiation. I value every day more than I did before, but I don't think I have fundamentally changed.

So if I had told you twenty years ago that you would be saying “Dayenu” for President Trump and lobbying for Saudi Arabia, you wouldn't feel that maybe something had changed?

I think I am fighting the spread of the most dangerous country in the region, which is Iran. Working with Saudi Arabia is in the interest of Israel. Saying “Dayenu” to President Trump is heartfelt, in that he has done so much for something that I value so greatly, the U.S.-Israel relationship. I feel bad for people who hate the President so much that they can't, for a moment, say, “Thank you.”



Isaac Chotiner is a staff writer at The New Yorker, where he is the principal contributor to Q. & A., a series of interviews with

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