

# Bam vs. Bibi

by **Richard Kostelanetz** (April 2015)

It was a heavyweight battle between one fighter carrying the banners of Occidental, Columbia College, and Harvard Law; the other the banner of MIT, both with imperious personalities, one representing Goliath and the other David—the latter a veteran politician experienced with both international and domestic maneuvering, the other a greenhorn with his short meteoric career.

Though they seemed equally adept rhetorically, one major cultural difference not to be discounted is that Bibi went to public high school within the 48 states while the other passed through a private school in a former American colony quite distant, culturally as well as physically, from the mainland. May I conjecture that as the son of a major historian Bibi in Philadelphia learned more about the history of minorities at Cheltenham High School than as the son of a middling anthropologist Bam did at Punahou in Honolulu.

Bam's greenhorn mistake was trying to influence an election in Bibi's distant country whose citizens are notoriously recalcitrant and no less independent than Americans who would resent another country's, any other country's, insidious machinations in their native elections. Even though pre-election polls predicted another guy's winning, some Israelis voters switched their allegiance to Bibi, perhaps because Bam inadvertently persuaded them to fear that at defending Israel (from real enemies) the current American president and thus his Israeli friends cannot be trusted

The American intrusion apparently backfired, Bam unwittingly contributing to Bibi's winning a plurality in a democratic system where a few percentage points can be decisive. My suspicion now is that Bibi came to the US a fortnight before the Israeli election as a cunning David prepared to exploit Goliath's arrogant disdain. At getting others to do his bidding, often unwittingly, Bibi is no doubt an old Israeli pro. Consider this: About what other country with a few million people would a chief commanding a few hundred million comment so ostentatiously on the former's speech to the latter's parliament? Wow.

One truth unfamiliar to most Americans, especially gentiles, is that Israelis differ from American Jews in more ways than I care to count. Writing some years ago about a prominent African-American novelist's disdain for black West Indians, none of whom did I ever meet in visits to his house, I compared his sentiments to many American Jews' disdain for Israelis, women as well as men, who cross their paths. (Generally pro-Israel, I too have experienced negative reactions to individual Israelis.) To outsiders, we ought to like each other, but

sometimes we insiders don't. Some of this distaste informs certain American Jews' responses to Israelis—even to American-speaking Bibi.

I once wrote that the word smug defined a person capable of making a mistake whose negative results he can't immediately recognize, let alone later acknowledge. By this definition, Bam is classically smug. In his *agon* with Bibi, he's been had, though he may not yet know he's been had or let himself be had; and I dare not predict when he'll find out that, indeed, he helped Bibi win, perhaps crucially, and thus let MIT vanquish Harvard, *et al*, with not just America but the whole world watching. Another mistake made by Bam was thinking he could push around a solicitous American Jew, which might be Bibi's sound to his ears, instead of a cunning Israeli incidentally fluent in American English.

Even after the election, big Bam's underlings are repeatedly criticizing Israeli results, no doubt with their boss's approval. Need I judge that this they, so paternalistic, would not do about those in any other country large or, in this case, small. So petulant has this rhetoric become that I'm waiting for the announcement that the US will send in its Marines to Tel-Aviv, as it might have done years ago to some Latin American banana republic voting contrary to current Presidential designs, our Marines making mischief until their chief proclaims "victory" for his "two-state solution" and brings our troops home for a ticker-tape parade.

As an aspiring "intellectual" Bam seems not to understand why Americans, even middle Americans, should be more predisposed to Israel than to any ugly Palestinian claims and thus why nearly all Congresspeople should vote for Israeli aid. (Blaming this predisposition on some super-powerful Israeli-Jewish lobby is a fantasy strictly for pseudo-intellectuals.) One truth Bam might be reluctant to face is knowing that Bibi will remain a chief after Bam has gone. My hunch is that Bam, essentially homeless, with a reputation for disappointing, is calculating on making himself acceptable for his next job somewhere high in the American liberal-cultural complex.

Elsewhere I've conjectured that Bam in mellow Hawaii never learned the first lesson of, say, Jackie Robinson's experience or that of Louis Brandeis—that the avatar of any minority previously excluded from a certain rarefied terrain CANNOT DISAPPOINT in America. Those with short memories cite antagonistic obstacles set in Bam's path, as though Jackie didn't face any. A minority person's failure on such an opportunity inadvertently disadvantages many after him. May I venture that few thoroughfares will be named Bamway.

As I first paid dues to the NAACP around 1960, may I hope that common understanding of Bam's insufficiencies should be based upon his political inexperience or upon his growing up outside

the 48 states, rather than some other more visible but finally less important identity. No more greenhorns and no more Hawaiians, please?

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Individual entries on **Richard Kostelanetz's** work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, *NNDB.com*, *Wikipedia.com*, and *Britannica.com*, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. His many books are