

ROY MEACHUM

Viewpoint



Venomous Vidal and the Israeli lobby

Free Press 6/13/86

Columnist Ben Wattenberg opened these pages last week to the national spitting contest between novelist-gadfly Gore Vidal and columnist-activist Norman Podhoretz.

On Friday's *News-Post* editorial page, Wattenberg instigated himself into the quarrel, taking issue with Vidal's characterization of Podhoretz as "a stooge" for Israeli policy. Wattenberg was right: Vidal is vicious.

Although "bitchy" is the word that comes to my mind when attempting to depict the novelist's public statements about his literary colleagues and competitors. His shouting feud with fellow novelist Norman Mailer led to a famous punch out; Mailer landed all the blows that counted. Boose was a factor in the brawl.

The exact origin of the Podhoretz-Vidal affair probably stems from their first encounter; their enmity is no new thing. Much of the present national nastiness could have been avoided if Norman Podhoretz would have been raised in the South, where early on young children learn about avoiding contests with sharks. Because they both cruise the same Manhattan literary salons and saloons, Podhoretz must certainly have some understanding of Vidal's flawed character.

Whatever rattled the novelist's easily upset teacups, Vidal took poisoned pen to Podhoretz and his wife in *The Nation*, a magazine that exists in relative obscurity to serve one segment of the country's self-anointed intellectuals.

Vidal's venomous remarks would have received their well deserved instant burial, except Podhoretz felt impelled to reply in his syndicated column. Of course newspapers across the country had to print the novelist's original piece so their readers would know why columnist Podhoretz was so hopping mad. Ben Wattenberg was only one among a number of writers sucked into the battle. What a pity!

Of course, Vidal's remarks were anti-Semitic: because Podhoretz is Jewish. If his target were Italian, the novelist would almost certainly link him to the Mafia. This is standard low-blow tactics from bitchy fighters.

Furthermore, everything about Gore Vidal reeks of intolerance for anyone not born to his peculiar circumstances: rich and spoiled and very Social Register. Nothing about the man suggests he has any understanding for what passes as normality in his fellow Americans. This is the basis on which he should have been answered; or better yet — ignored.

Instead, Podhoretz descended to the low level of Vidal's attack. His tone was no less virulent. He concentrated on defending himself against the "stooge" charge.

Wattenberg expanded the importance of the Vidal remarks and compounded further Podhoretz' mistake by attempting to depict the Israeli lobby as no more significant than any other group of ethnic Americans. Hogwash! Ask ex-Sen. Charles Percy.

Better yet, ask Minnesota Sen. Rudy Boschwitz. During the recent Capitol Hill debate over selling arms to the Saudis, Boschwitz trucked around among his fellow legislators the man who bragged he spent a cool \$1 million to defeat Percy. As chairman of the foreign relations committee, the former Illinois senator failed to receive 100 on the Zionist report card.

Whether true or not, Boschwitz sought to impress upon his colleagues — with

else this country has seen: in the past century, railroads and banks bought and sold our legislators, and on a regular basis, but behind closed doors. At the first hint of publicity, those earlier lobbyists went into hiding.

Not the Israeli lobby: they believe in flaunting their power. They steamroller opponents with smears that are themselves in violation of Jewish tradition and teachings. Anyone who questions their methods must be anti-Semitic, they scream.

Sen. Charles McC. Mathias earned their undying enmity when, in his gentle, intellectual way, he wrote a magazine article expressing a quandary over the disproportionate influence exercised by "ethnic lobbies." Israel was not mentioned, nor was "Jewish." The article appeared shortly after his last election, in 1981.

In February last year, the *Baltimore Sun* reported Maryland Zionist groups' announced opposition to re-election efforts by the state's senior U.S. Senator; they cited that magazine piece: this is how I learned it existed. In subsequent stories, the *Sun* repeated that Mathias had singled out no specific ethnic group. It made no difference to the Israeli lobbyists: they vowed to fight the distinguished legislator whom they had supported before.

How much was the Zionist opposition a factor in Mathias' decision not to run again? I don't know; I never asked him. But he and Charles Percy were close; they belonged to the moderate Republican wing. They served on the foreign relations committee together. Mathias must have known about Boschwitz' "million-dollar man" and his allies.

Does writing these facts make me "anti-Semitic"? Certainly, in some people's eyes. But reality must be spelled out, that is my job. Attention must be called to aberrations in our democratic system.

By going too far, Podhoretz and Wattenberg made necessary my entry into what should have been left to the private confines of their literary circles. I could not let stand half-truths about the reach and impact of the Israeli lobby, not in this newspaper. Not in the hometown of Charles McC. Mathias.

In addition, I am concerned for people whom I love. American Jews will suffer when the inevitable reaction sets in to the abuse of influence by the Israeli lobby. In this country, power moves in cycles: no element remains on top all the time.

Finally, I do not believe Gore Vidal is a true anti-Semite. That would require him to take a position. He delights in his perversity. Given a new persecution of Jews, the novelist would probably go out and buy a Star of David and wear it in the streets. At the very least, he would turn his bitchiness loose on the persecuting regime.

Gore Vidal as a neo-Nazi storm trooper? The uniform colors would almost certainly clash with his complexion. Forget it.