

The General and the 'Jewish Influence'

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NOT SINCE the Nixon White House transcripts have we heard from anybody in high government office remarks as offensive as those attributed to Gen. George S. Brown, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the subject of "Jewish influence" and "Jewish money" and the supposed impact of both on this country's Middle East policy. Gen. Brown is the highest-ranking member of our armed forces, and in an organization as disciplined as the military, the standards are set at the very top. The standard set by Gen. Brown in a question-and-answer period following a speech in Durham, N.C., last month has raised doubts about his future usefulness in the extraordinarily powerful post he now holds.

The general was responding to the question of whether the United States was contemplating the use of force against oil-producing nations in the event of another embargo on oil. One can hardly imagine a more delicate issue, or one more properly left to measured statements by the President of the United States or other civilian policy-makers. The proper, prudent answer, for any responsible—and intelligent—high-ranking military officer, was that this was not an issue he could in any way be expected to discuss. But Gen. Brown plunged into a meandering dissertation on the possibility of something "almost as bad as the 'Seven Days in May' thing," and of what might happen if the American public should become sufficiently "inconvenienced and uncomfortable" as a result of another oil embargo. What might happen, the general volunteered, was that people would get "toughminded enough to set down the Jewish influence in the country and break the [Israeli] lobby."

This thesis is as mindless as it is offensive. But that is not even the worst part of it. The worst part of it is that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was crudely involving himself in the conduct of foreign policy. To the extent that he was saying anything intelligible, he was suggest-

ing that the way to bring peace in the Middle East is for an outraged citizenry to turn against the "Jewish influence," presumably for the purpose of forcing Israel to make peace on terms more acceptable to the Arabs. It scarcely needs to be said that this is none of Gen. Brown's business; one would have supposed that this principle had long since been firmly, and wisely, established as fundamental to the functioning of our system of government.

Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger described the general's remarks as a "very unfortunate mis-expression of the general's opinion." If that is the case, Gen. Brown is either confused about his own opinion or appallingly inarticulate. Either way, Mr. Schlesinger's explanation is not particularly reassuring. President Ford was more emphatic, describing Gen. Brown's observations as "ill-advised and poorly handled." The White House said Mr. Ford felt "very strongly" about it. As for the general himself, he was properly profuse in his apologies in a telegram to the national commander of the Jewish War Veterans and in a statement issued at the Pentagon. But his apologies had largely to do with the question of the right of pressure groups in this country, including the American Jewish community, to express their views "forcefully." The general correctly conceded that this right lies "at the very heart of democracy," and this is responsive to at least a part of what was wrong with what Gen. Brown had to say in Durham. But it does not address itself to the central point and neither do the statements by the Secretary of Defense or the President. For it is not enough to note the obvious: that Gen. Brown's remarks were "unfortunate" or "ill-advised" or "poorly handled." What is missing from the general's civilian superiors is some sign of awareness of the impropriety of any public statements by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs about the conduct of this country's Mideast policy.