

# MARSHALL BREGER AND THE WORST JOB IN WASHINGTON

If the leadership of the Jewish community could put together the ideal White House liaison, he would undoubtedly have the visage and bearing of a WASP banker. He would wear impeccable blue-striped three-piece suits; he would speak soothing, diplomatic phrases, with perhaps just a hint of a clipped Oxford accent. He would have long-standing organizational ties, be a personal friend of every Jewish leader. He would wear his Jewishness casually, would be religiously observant but neither fastidiously nor excessively so. He would be intelligent, of course—but not so brilliant as to be threatening. He would be able to get organizational leaders into the Oval Office on demand. In a crisis, he would be able to steer the White House in just the direction the Jewish community wanted. And most important, he would have instant access to the President day or night.

Ah, such a liaison!

Marshall Jordan Breger is not such a liaison. He does not look at all like a WASP banker. He is heavy, and even at his most formal he appears disheveled and distracted. He wears pinstriped suits—but on at least one occasion it was the blue pinstriped jacket from one suit and the brown pinstriped pants from another. He received his Bachelor of Philosophy degree from Oxford, but his accent is pure, unadulterated New York. He suffers fools poorly and does not bother to hide his impatience with what he regards as stupidity. He tends to be bluntly direct, is not sparing of fragile sensitivities. He is deeply and devoutly Jewish and makes no secret of his Jewishness or, indeed, of his Orthodoxy. (While a law professor in Buffalo, New York, he served as Vice President of the Western New York Friends of Chabad-Lubavitch.) He enjoys the interplay of ideas, his excitement during debate sometimes appearing almost childlike. But he also has a clear, well-organized mind and a wry, caustic sense of humor.

*David Silverberg, a reporter for the Washington Jewish Week, writes frequently on politics and foreign affairs. Copyright © 1985 by David Silverberg.*

The current Jewish liaison to the White House, Breger came to prominence recently as a result of his role—or lack of it—in the Bitburg affair. What he did or did not do, what he said or did not say, has been subjected to near-microscopic scrutiny in the Jewish world.

His alleged crime? Breger asked author Elie Wiesel to keep his remarks before the President to three minutes and to not criticize the President directly. He also asked New Jersey Senator Frank Lautenberg to intervene with Wiesel, a request Lautenberg rejected and denounced. On an issue in which the anger of the Jewish community ran so deep that pollster Richard Wirthlin said it was “stronger than we are able to measure in survey research,” Breger’s role resulted in headlines like the one in the newspaper *Israel Today*: “Breger to Wiesel: Cool It.” And Mark Siegel, Jewish liaison to the Carter White House, accused Breger of violating his conscience.

Nor was the Wiesel episode the only aspect of the Bitburg affair that elicited criticism of Breger. Jewish professionals note that the White House did not appear to have consulted Breger about the visit and that Breger was in Israel during some of the worst days of the controversy. Monday morning quarterback say he should have resigned. Others thought he was too far outside the White House inner circle to be effective.

At the same time, his friends have rallied to his side with ferocious protectiveness. They have intervened on his behalf to head off or mitigate articles critical of him. They praise him extravagantly for his effectiveness. Even Pat Buchanan, the White House director of communications, a man with a reputation for inaccessibility, has testified on Breger’s behalf.

“He’s a very principled human being,” says Buchanan. “He is loyal to the President and to the Jewish community, which he served through some tough times.”

Though much of the Bitburg tumult has died down, reverberations continue. And Breger continues to be the man in the middle.

Breger, in large part, is feeling the

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consequences of holding the worst job in Washington.

While other ethnic liaisons are part of their communities and have some standing therein, Jews tend to look on their own White House liaison with a combination of suspicion and contempt. The dominant Jewish feeling seems to be that not only does the liaison—whoever he is—not serve the Jewish community enough, he is also a flunky for the administration. Since a permanent, full-time Jewish liaison was first appointed by the Carter administration, the average liaison's tenure has been about a year and most have resigned in disgust, frustration and disillusionment.

When Breger took office in December 1983, he was not helped by the fact that he was a stranger to the cozy—but sometimes contentious—family of analysts, lobbyists, professionals, politicians, lay leaders and *machers* who make up the Jewish leadership. He had served on the Board of Governors of Buffalo's Jewish Federation, but otherwise he was a stranger to the Jewish communal framework, largely unknown to Jewish leaders. He recalls that when he was asked in his early days as liaison whether he had ever been on an Israel "mission," or federation tour, he very innocently replied that he had not—which led his listener to conclude he had never been to Israel. In fact he had been there dozens of times. He'd simply never been there on an organized trip.

The result was that Breger was not taken very seriously by an important segment of his Jewish constituency. He quickly became the subject of rumors and unflattering stories, which were embellished with time. (Though most were good for a laugh, or at least a roll of the eyes, on close examination they turned out to be untrue.) There was also the fear that in a White House with very, very few Jews, Breger himself, he of the rumpled New York demeanor, would be seen as the "representative" Jew, stereotype for us all.

How, then, did the White House come to him?

What Breger does have in abundance are academic achievements, publications—and solid conservative

credentials. He received his undergraduate, graduate and law degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, received two prizes for work in criminal law, clerked for the respected Judge Marvin Frankel and held a series of teaching posts, eventually becoming an Associate Professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He wrote for numerous law reviews and contributed chapters to books on a wide variety of subjects.

His conservative background dates back to 1964—the year of the Goldwater candidacy—when he served as an intern to the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. In 1980-81, he served on the Reagan transition team on legal services. In 1982 he became a Visiting Fellow in Legal Policy at the Heritage Foundation, perhaps the most influential of the conservative think tanks, where he wrote op ed pieces on a number of subjects, particularly the Middle East. Several of these appeared in the very conservative Sun Myung Moon-owned newspaper, *The Washington Times*. Moreover, Breger detected a conservative strain in the Jewish community that he felt could—and should—be nurtured.

Such conservative activism brought him to the attention of Faith Ryan Whittlesey, a strongly ideological woman who, in March 1983, was named head of the White House Office of Public Affairs, the office in which the various liaisons work. In December of that year, when Jewish liaison Michael Gale left to take a job as a congressional liaison for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Breger replaced him.

If Jewish expectations create impossible demands on the liaison, the White House's expectations do not make the job any easier.

In general, the White House is looking for someone who will wade into the enclaves of Brooklyn to explain why advanced arms in the hands of the Saudis are no threat to Israel. It wants someone who can bring the message to Florida's condos that the administration has yet again saved Israel from disaster. And when it wants to mobilize Jewish political muscle on behalf of non-Jewish issues—well,

the liaison should do that, too. Not to mention the additional tasks of making sense out of the alphabet soup of Jewish organizations and making sure they all get congratulatory telegrams for their annual conventions. Inevitably, the liaison must deal with questions of U.S.-Israel relations—in which case he will be up against State Department and foreign affairs experts who see his efforts as unwarranted meddling in their own sensitive areas.

The Reagan administration has gone through several phases in dealing with the liaison office. Initially, it was opposed to a liaison post. Jewish input came through several friends of the President, notably West Coast businessmen Ted Cummings and Al Spiegel.

Almost from the day Mr. Reagan took office, however, the administration was committed to some form of arms sale to Saudi Arabia and when a fight over the sale began to develop, the administration decided it needed a full-time intermediary. The person chosen was Jacob Stein, a Long Island real estate magnate and Jewish activist, who took office in April 1981. He lasted only through the bitter battle over Advanced Warning and Airborne Control Systems (AWACS), and resigned in December of the same year.

For a while there was again no full-time liaison. Then Michael Gale, a former lobbyist for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, was picked to fill the role. During his tenure, which began in the spring of 1982, Gale dealt with one of the rockiest periods of U.S.-Israel relations, a period that included the Lebanon War, the Reagan plan, the U.S.-brokered Israeli-Lebanese agreement, and friction between American and Israeli forces in Lebanon. Although there were complaints in the Jewish community that Gale did not have enough access to the highest levels of government, he managed to keep open the lines of communication between the administration and the community. The relatively benign reception American Jewry gave to the Reagan plan—in contrast to Menachem Begin's outright rejection of it—was in no small measure due to those open lines of communication.

Gale was—and remains—a conservative Republican. So was—and is—Faith Whittlesey. But, according to a knowledgeable source, the two had strong differences on how to approach the Jewish community. Gale thought it hopeless to try to sell some aspects of the conservative domestic agenda to the Jewish community—particularly its view of church/state relations. In his view, the White House and the Jews could agree to disagree on such issues, while Jews continued to support the administration on U.S.-Israel relations and other non-controversial areas. Whittlesey, by contrast, wanted her office to sell the entire conservative program: prayer in school, the budget, reductions in government services, Central America. And that meant selling to all constituencies, Jews included.

Whittlesey also had a brusque and sometimes brutal way of operating: She fired 30 people on her first day in office in order to replace them with her own team. Although Gale survived the initial purge, his days were numbered.

For Breger, the switch from academia to the White House was a bewildering one.

"It's a rapid change of pace," he said, shortly after moving into his new quarters. "I used to have the luxury of thinking a problem through four different ways and then putting it aside. Now I have to make quick decisions based on the best available information, without exhaustive analysis. I have less time for analytic writing. Nonetheless, I find it challenging."

What the public heard of Breger pre-Bitburg were his introductions of speakers and occasional debates and speeches where he did yeoman work attempting to sell unpopular administration policies—on church/state relations and Central America—to hostile audiences.

But Breger's far more substantive work was taking place beyond the public eye. And it began even before he took the Jewish liaison office.

Throughout his academic career, Breger frequently organized conferences and symposia on Israel-related subjects, recalls Nathan Lewin, a prominent Washington attorney and

Jewish activist and one of Breger's staunchest defenders. At the Heritage Foundation, Breger continued the practice, and Lewin credits him with helping move the foundation toward Israel.

In particular, in June 1983, Breger helped organize a group to tour Israel that included Ed Fuelner, president of the Heritage Foundation, Pat Buchanan, then a conservative columnist, Midge Decter, a conservative writer, Ernest LeFever, Alan Riskin, editor of the magazine *Human Events* and Ron Robertson, chief counsel of the Reagan-Bush '84 campaign.

"He was great fun to travel with," recalls Buchanan of Breger. "We kidded him a lot. He takes a joke well."

But the most important aspect of the trip occurred when the group met with some low-level officials in the Israeli Ministry of Trade and, in Breger's words, "They broached in a very tentative way—they had not really thought it through—the idea of a free trade area between Israel and the United States." In a free trade area (FTA), the U.S. and Israel would drop all tariff barriers on mutual trade. It would be the first such arrangement the United States had ever made with another country.

It was an idea that the Heritage group liked a great deal, appealing as it did to their free enterprise sensibilities. Upon his return to the United States, Breger, according to one source, organized a dinner, including among the guests Fuelner and William Clark, then the National Security Advisor. Clark thought the idea a good one and so, when Fuelner and Breger wrote a letter to the President outlining the details of the Free Trade Area, the President was very receptive. And that receptivity was conveyed, in part by Breger, throughout the bureaucracies dealing with international trade.

Yitzhak Shamir had many things on his agenda when he came to the United States for a summit with President Reagan in November 1983; an FTA was not one of them. It came, therefore, as a total surprise to the Israeli delegation when it was raised as one element in a new, closer U.S.-

Israel relationship.

The FTA still had a long way to go from there. Congress had to grant the U.S. Special Trade Representative, Bill Brock, authority to negotiate the FTA. The negotiations had to delineate the areas of U.S.-Israeli trade and determine the actual terms of the agreement. And Congress had to give its final approval.

The FTA was something everyone wanted. The administration liked the idea of FTAs in general and the U.S.-Israel FTA was a good prototype because it was sure to have a strong grass roots constituency and powerful congressional support behind it. Despite the worries of some American industry executives who feared that their businesses would be adversely affected by Israeli competition, Congress had no serious objections—it was a measure supported from the right to the left. And the Israelis needed American markets to help lift them out of their desperate economic straits. Moreover, they were being helped through trade, not charity or aid, which also benefited the United States and pleased conservatives. The FTA went through the governmental process with considerable speed and little trouble for such a major piece of legislation.

Throughout the process, Breger prodded, pushed and pleaded the cause of the Free Trade Area, arranging briefings, holding press conferences, arguing the FTA's case to all who would listen. When it was finally signed, the small circle of professionals who had worked on the FTA credited him with having made a major contribution.

Another of the achievements with which Breger is credited was to have remained secret. Elements of it are still closely guarded and Breger himself will not speak about the incident in any way. Indeed, had an American reporter not been on the spot when this action was executed, the world to this day would not know about the CIA airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Israel had been secretly evacuating Ethiopian Jews to Israel for a number of years. However, the pace of the evacuation was stepped up in late

1984 when Ethiopia was devastated by famine. Premature publicity halted the airlift of the Jews from Sudan, where the Israeli planes had been landing, and left several thousand stranded in refugee camps.

Appeals were made to the United States to help get the remaining Ethiopian Jews out. But, according to a knowledgeable source whose story is confirmed by others involved, there was resistance from various agencies of the American government. It was argued that an American airlift might hurt U.S. relations with Sudan—whose pro-American government was notoriously unstable—as well as with black Africa and the Arab world. If the operation went awry, the consequences could be disastrous. There were questions of simple practicality: getting the planes and people to the right spot. And there was the question of U.S. involvement in a situation that was, at best, peripheral to its interests.

The decision to intervene had to be made at a very high level of the U.S. government. Whoever made it would have to take the blame if it failed and would get no public credit if it succeeded.

"There were some critical meetings," says someone who was close to the situation. "There is no question that at the critical junctures the close relationship between [Vice President] Bush and Breger got this going." And, he adds, "It almost didn't happen."

Once Bush approved the operation, the resistant agencies were overruled and the Ethiopian Jews were evacuated.

Breger is credited as well with other, little-known triumphs that have had large consequences. According to some sources, he is in part responsible for getting the President suddenly to endorse the Genocide Convention, a treaty held up in the Senate for 36 years and the target of conservative ire. He is credited with keeping the Soviet Jewry issue high on the administration's agenda, a topic raised in every U.S.-Soviet meeting.

And Breger is credited with having good relationships throughout the bureaucracy, reaching as high as Na-

tional Security Advisor Robert McFarlane. These serve him well in the performance of his duties and in the achievement of his goals.

It is easy to see why. First impressions aside, Breger's clear, well-organized mind and solid analytic powers are apparent. His rough, wry humor and lumbering manner can charm, make him good company. Moreover, Breger is a man of ideas—and his ideas are respected in the conservative circles in which he moves. By now, he has been on the job long enough for these qualities to be discovered.

All this would have been known only to a small circle of intimates, bureaucrats and Jewish professionals, and publicly Breger would have remained a distant, slightly disheveled administration spokesman peddling Reaganite boilerplate, had it not been for one incident—Bitburg.

Bitburg was every staff person's nightmare and it was particularly nightmarish for Breger. Good staff people thrive on anonymity. It is the head of the organization who should always shine—not the lowly staffers who set up the spotlights. When the spotlight turns on a staffer, it usually turns for the wrong reasons. Bitburg froze Breger in a glare of publicity, much of it Jewish and most of it uncomplimentary.

When Breger left Washington on April 3 for a Passover holiday in Israel, the President was going to visit Bitburg but was not going to visit a concentration camp. According to one source, Breger thought the President should visit a camp and had presented his views to the President. While Breger was in Israel, the President indeed decided to visit Dachau. But during the last two days of Passover, it was learned that the Bitburg cemetery contained SS graves.

According to this account, Breger was in contact with White House officials and they with him as soon as the Passover holiday ended at dusk on Saturday, April 13. Breger still had a lecture to deliver at Bar-Ilan University the following Monday, April 15, and because of airline schedules, he was unable to catch a plane until Tuesday night, which brought him into

Washington on Wednesday, April 17.

The telling moment was going to be that Friday, April 19, when Elie Wiesel was to receive the Congressional Gold Medal in a White House ceremony. There was enormous uncertainty. Members of the Jewish community were calling on the members of the Holocaust Memorial Council to resign in protest. The White House appeared unresponsive to Jewish complaints. Thursday, April 18, was Yom Hashoah, with Holocaust commemorations taking place around the country and the Jewish community at its most sensitive. At the center of the controversy was Elie Wiesel, the author who has come to embody the Holocaust experience, the archetypal survivor, a man whose actions and words could be crucial.

The White House frantically sought the counsel of Republican Jews; Wiesel was deluged with advice, was himself unsure whether or not to accept the congressional medal. The White House was dealing with a man of immense stature, scheduled to appear on television in the presence of the President, a man whose actions could be neither predicted nor controlled—the kind of situation in which the President is at his most vulnerable. Moreover, if Wiesel directly attacked the President, backing him into a corner, the White House staff felt the President would have no choice but to continue with the visit to Bitburg, thus maintaining his "presidential" stature and proving he would not bend to Jewish pressure. But for his part, Wiesel had pursued a career as a spokesman for a generation, a people and a pivotal event, and not speaking out could cause outrage in the Jewish community.

Into this maelstrom descended Marshall Breger, back from seven hours through international time zones and expected to deal immediately with the Bitburg crisis. Breger, a loyal soldier, attempted to inject some predictability into a volatile situation. He began contacting people in an effort to hold down the potential embarrassment Wiesel might cause. Part of that effort included arranging a private meeting between Wiesel and the President.

The Thursday night before the

speech—Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day—was the worst for all parties concerned. Wiesel had sent a text of his speech to White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan. That night, he says, pressure—orchestrated by Breger—was put on him not to criticize the President. He was pressured by Sen. Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, Malcolm Hoenlein, director of the New York Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) and Kenneth Bialkin, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations and others, “even higher,” whom he will not name.

Breger denies trying to pressure Wiesel, who, he says, was in contact with a wide variety of people that Thursday night. Hoenlein, who was also to participate in the next day’s ceremony, likewise denies attempting to pressure Wiesel. “I was never asked to speak to Wiesel. We were debating into the night about what to do. We had a lot of reservations. And one of the things was that we would be able to speak to [the White House]. They did not come to me to convince me or ask me to intercede.”

Bialkin, too, denies being asked to pressure Wiesel. “Breger did not ask me to speak to Elie. I had no discussions with Breger. Elie called me at dinner and said he was not sure what to do. . . . I said, ‘Elie, do what you want to do. Whatever you do, I will back you up.’”

But Lautenberg had a different impression. He told the *New York Times* that Breger did ask him to “ask Elie Wiesel to take the sting out of his words because it would be insulting to the President.”

The next day was the day of reckoning. Wiesel, Hoenlein and Peggy Tishman, president of the New York JCRC, were to meet with the President. Before the meeting, Breger spoke to Wiesel.

It was one of those awful moments when everything hangs on a moment of human interaction, when the whole universe seems to depend on a few spoken words and when the way they are spoken counts for as much as the words themselves.

On one side was Breger, never the most subtle or diplomatic of men, the loyal White House aide, weary from

travel, pressured, unsure of what Wiesel was about to do on television in the President’s presence. On the other side was Wiesel, himself still unsure of what he was going to do, about to confront the President of the United States on a matter of morality that would have enormous international repercussions.

Breger recalls telling Wiesel to limit his speech to three minutes or so, and to avoid direct criticism of the President. Beyond the three-minute limit, the President’s schedule was such that it would require him to leave.

Wiesel subsequently said that Breger was “angry,” and tried to censor him, a charge Breger denies. The problem, Breger has said, was scheduling, not censorship.

“There was some exasperation on both their parts,” says Peggy Tishman. “It was a very highly charged period. . . . Marshall was under enormous pressure. Elie was under enormous pressure and so everyone had raw nerves. I think it was very anxious. Everybody was shaking. Anything anyone said to Marshall he took offense at and anything anyone said to Elie he took offense at.

“The President was pretty fraught too,” she adds. “It was just a terrible time.”

It was this encounter—and the phone-calling back and forth on Thursday night—that has given rise to the charge that Breger attempted to censor Wiesel.

Wiesel went to White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, asked for more time and was given five minutes. Wiesel will not comment on his conversation with Breger, but he notes pointedly that Regan “behaved like a gentleman. He was very polite, very distinguished.”

According to a source who has scheduled the President and who is familiar with Wiesel, this was not the first time there had been friction between Wiesel and the White House over scheduling. Wiesel is notorious for speaking over his time limit and in 1983, prior to President Reagan’s address to the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Washington, Wiesel was told he could either speak for three minutes before

the President’s address, or have unlimited time after the President spoke. After much discussion, Wiesel chose to speak after the President’s address—and spoke for 21 minutes. Wiesel says he does not remember the incident.

The Breger-Wiesel confrontation became known to the public through a *New York Times* article profiling Breger that appeared shortly after the incident. This set off the avalanche of publicity that for the first time made Breger’s name widely known in the Jewish community.

Ironically, just when Breger’s stock in much of the Jewish community fell, his standing in the White House rose. There, he was viewed as a loyal soldier who had served on the front lines and taken the worst that could be dished out. Breger’s friends and the White House staff rallied around him. Despite a raft of rumors that he is about to move over to the Justice Department, he insists he is in the White House as long as he is needed there.

Right now, Breger can take comfort in his accomplishments and the beginning of a free trade area that he helped implement. But despite the current era of good feeling in U.S.-Israel relations, the conflicts between the Jews and the administration are bound to come up again. There is talk of a new arms sale to Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and arms sales are the traditional nemesis of the Jewish liaison.

But Breger broke a number of traditions when he took on the liaison job. He is the first academic and the first Orthodox Jew. Most of his problems have come from the community to which he is a liaison, and not from the administration he serves. It will be interesting to see if Breger can avoid leaving his post in disgust or disillusion—and if he can turn the worst job in Washington into something more noble and constructive than it has been in the past. ★

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