



***Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance***,  
by Amy Kaplan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.  
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REVIEWED BY ALEX LUBIN

Amy Kaplan's luminous scholarship on U.S. imperial culture, including the coedited volume *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Duke University Press, 1994) and the monograph *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of the U.S. Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2005) have helped define scholarly understandings of U.S. empire as always linked to "domestic" cultural productions of race and gender. In her highly anticipated new book, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance*, Kaplan turns her attention to the ways U.S. imperial culture informs and shapes the U.S.-Israel relationship, a relationship she demonstrates has undergone

significant transformation throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing on new archival sources and brilliant analysis, *Our American Israel* breaks new scholarly ground.

*Our American Israel* opens by focusing on the sometimes-overlooked Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which was empowered to study the question of partition following the

termination of the British Mandate over Palestine. Kaplan focuses her analysis on two participants, both of whom played an important role in shaping Western attitudes about the question of Palestine and the Jewish question: Bartley Crum, an American civil rights attorney from San Francisco and Richard Crossman, a British Labour member of Parliament. In his memoir about the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, Kaplan argues that Crum Americanized Zionism in ways that would prove influential over U.S. policymakers. Crum saw the Zionist movement as analogous to U.S. national development over the North American continent, and the aspect of Zionism that most struck him was its commitment to “modernization.”

If memoirs by Crum and journalism by American liberals like I. F. Stone cemented a postwar view of Zionism as a modernization project that would elevate the region, American popular culture played an equally important role in Americanizing the story of Israel by transposing American national mythology onto Israel’s formation. The quintessential example of this phenomenon was Leon Uris’s novel, *Exodus*, and the related film. Kaplan notes that *Exodus* is an American story, told by an American writer, who used the American Western genre to relate a story of Jewish displaced persons as heroic settlers fighting backward Arabs and British colonists. The film influenced American perceptions of Israel as a heroic anti-colonial project against British imperialism that, like the United States, was intent on vanquishing natives in its way. But this heroic narrative came under question with the 1967 war, when it appeared that Israel was a colonial power and not merely a victim.

The 1967 war, followed by the occupation of the West Bank, threw into question Israel’s status as perpetual victim, just at the moment that a Third World movement was challenging Western-backed colonialism. Concurrently, the Palestinian national movement sought to globalize the Palestinian struggle for decolonization by linking their movement with other anti-colonial movements across Africa and Latin America. Kaplan argues that the post-1967 period was one in which the United States understood Israel through its own anxiety and uncertainty about the Vietnam War, as well as by its attempt to manage the Third World movement. In this context, Israel was viewed as vulnerable and invincible, while the Palestinian nationalist movement would be understood as a violent terroristic struggle. Israel’s vanquishing of terrorists in Entebbe, Uganda, on 4 July 1976 (note the date) represented for Americans the best possible outcome of a muscular foreign policy. However, the excessive force used to target the Palestinian perpetrators of the Munich Olympics terrorist attack threatened to undermine Israel’s claim to vulnerability.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon, more than previous aggressive acts, threatened to undermine the U.S. consensus about Israeli vulnerability. Kaplan documents several examples of U.S. criticism of Israel following the Lebanon invasion, including public statements that cast Lebanese and Palestinian peoples as victims of Israeli aggression and Israel as like the United States in Vietnam—a colonial power, or worse, a terrorist. The rhetoric undergirding U.S. support for Israel had to change; the administration of President Ronald Reagan began to focus on Israel’s importance as a “strategic asset” in the region and therefore a country that deserved increased foreign aid. Similarly, Kaplan shows, mainstream U.S. Jewish organizations like the Anti-Defamation League stepped up criticism of the U.S. media, which it accused of anti-Semitism. Throughout the 1980s, a liberal consensus emerged of two people fighting over

the same land. This was a consensus that ignored asymmetries of power within a liberal framework of human equivalencies.

As Israeli vulnerability came under renewed scrutiny, a new rhetoric emerged in the late 1970s to reestablish the important “bond” between the United States and Israel. Kaplan argues that it was not until the 1970s that the Holocaust entered U.S. public debate about Israel/Palestine, and that preventing a future Holocaust came to justify U.S. enduring support for Israel. Jimmy Carter was the first U.S. president to place the Holocaust at the center of U.S. commitment to Israel when, in 1993, he helped launch the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Although the United States did not want to be the World War II liberator of the Jews in Nazi Germany, through its support for the Holocaust Museum and the “never again” rhetoric that went with it, the United States and Israel understood themselves to be international sites of redemption.

Kaplan explores the evangelical Christian appropriation of Israel by excavating the origins of Christian Zionism in events like singer Pat Boone’s travel to Israel, and in popular culture, like the popular *Left Behind* book series. In the final chapter, “Homeland Insecurities,” *Our American Israel* compellingly argues that since 9/11, Israel has become an extension of U.S. counterinsurgency power. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the country embraced an identity as Israel-like, as one of a pair of “virtuous victims,” two countries always fighting against extermination. And, like Israel, the U.S. global war on terror targets Islam as the barbaric existential threat to freedom.

*Our American Israel* joins a distinguished list of scholarship on the U.S.-Israel relationship, including Melani McAlister’s *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (University of California Press, 2005), Douglas Little’s *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), and Keith P. Feldman’s *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), among others. What distinguishes *Our American Israel* from previous studies is its appreciation of the deeply layered cultural narratives that inform U.S. thinking about Israel as well as its focus on sources—American and Palestinian—that have previously been overlooked. What *Our American Israel* makes clear is that American attitudes about Israel are not timeless, that Israeli military aggression has repeatedly threatened U.S. support for Israel, and that Palestinian voices—although much too often silenced—have at times punctured the U.S. liberal consensus. Israel’s public relations efforts in the United States are so powerful precisely because the U.S. consensus about Israel is so unstable. Any attempt to undo the U.S.-Israel entanglement, Kaplan’s book implies, will require a serious interrogation of U.S. settler-colonial and imperial culture, two structures that inform what we know and see about U.S. engagements in the world.

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