Vidal's Outburst: An Ominous New Stage in Anti-Semitism

About a month ago, a letter was sent to 30 prominent friends and supporters of the leftist weekly, The Nation, which had earlier published an article by Gore Vidal that was perhaps the most blatantly anti-Semitic outburst to have appeared in a respectable American periodical since World War II.

These 30 people were asked whether they had seen fit to protest the article, either in private or in public. Of the 30, 21 never responded. Of the nine who did, only six expressed any type of approval of the article. The other three, although they expressed some reservations about the article but at the letter of inquiry, and one of them associated himself entirely with Vidal's sentiments.

The editor was Midge Decter (who runs the Committee for the Free World), and I were the main targets of Vidal's diatribe. But the vile accusations he made against us were not typical of the kind of venomous, antisemitic diatribes that support Israel, which means the vast majority of the Jewish community, that even some of our worst enemies were horrified.

Vidal is a magazine professing devotion to liberal values should be willing to print an article of a kind that is so readers to The Nation rightly said, would have been at home in one of the anti-Semitic sheets put out by the Nazis in the 1930s. And what is even more troubling is that, unlike the writer of that letter, most of The Nation's prominent friends and admirers have been unwilling to protest.

This marks an ominous new stage in our public discourse. Forty years ago, the sight vouchsafed by Hitler's death camp fires was that anti-Semitism could lead so great a revolution as that anyone harboring anti-Semitic attitudes could be able to manipulate them in public at the price of being shunned. Thus for a long time, no periodical aspiring to respectability, and a free one liberal magazine, would conceivably have published an article like Vidal's.

But with the Six-Day War of 1967, anti-Semitism began creeping back into public discourse and especially on the political left, under the guise of anti-Zionist. It was possible to criticize Israel without being anti-Semitic, it also became possible for anti-Semites to get away with putting all the old lies about the Jewish people back into circulation through the simple expedient of pretending they were only talking about the policies of the Israeli government.

Nor was there any great outcry from Jewish liberals who have been insisting that hostility to Israel and Jews generally is not a necessary component of the left-wing anti-Zionist position. Even the two or three who have spoken out against anti-Semitism have been a small presence.

Vidal, too, hides his anti-Semitism behind a supposedly anti-Zionist position. But in his case the pretense is so thin that his fellow anti-Zionists might have been expected to demur for fear of seeming to disavow their own position discredited by association.

And indeed, Geoffrey Stokes, the press critic of the Village Voice, whose hostility to Israel (and to me) is only slightly less virulent than Vidal's, nevertheless hastened to attack his article as an "anti-Semitic screed."

On the other hand, Tom Wicker of The New York Times and Roger Wilkins of the Institute for Policy Studies, who see a racist underriver bed, claim they do not even consider Vi- dal's article anti-Semitic... (I wonder how they feel about "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Nor was there any great outcry from Jewish liberals who have been insisting that hostility to Israel and Jews generally is not a necessary component of the left-wing anti-Zionist position. Even the two or three who have spoken out have used language so mild that one might think Vidal had been guilty of something more than a slightly intemperate polemic, or that his

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