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Tikkun magazine's Michael Lerner: We dishonor our tradition.

Last Ditch Glitch

Konnyu rescue move backfires

The 11th hour attempt by two cryptically named East Coast pro-Israel political action committees (PACs) to save Rep. Ernest Konnyu from electoral defeat last month has left members of the local Jewish community embarrassed and puzzled. The contributions, which reflect the single-issue orientation of nearly all such PACs, are fueling discussion among Israel's local supporters about what criteria PACs should use when deciding whether to support a candidate.

Alarmed by allegations that an all-powerful Jewish lobby ostensibly controls Congress, leaders of organizations supporting strong US-Israel ties have taken to masking their support for candidates through generic-

named PACs. In this case, not only was nobody fooled, the maneuver backfired.

In part, the controversy centers around the fact that instead of calling themselves what they are—PACs promoting a pro-Israeli American foreign policy—the committees use innocuous, even mysterious names like the "National PAC," or the "Hudson Valley PAC." The PACs contribute to races outside their geographic area to further obscure both the source of funds and the underlying issues of concern.

Thus, the locally-organized pro-Israel Citizens for Good Government PAC contributes to an Illinois congressional candidate while an East Coast pro-Israel sister PAC steers some of its money into a Bay Area contest.

This arrangement, which surfaced just days before his own party's voters retired him, led to Konnyu's receipt of the two controversial contributions amounting to \$7000, both from pro-Israel PACs based on the East Coast. Members of the traditionally liberal Jewish community have expressed outrage that funds went to a conservative Republican who advocated armed intervention in Central America and sponsored a bill calling for mandatory registration of all AIDS carriers.

The contributions were also noteworthy since, along with a last-minute \$50,000 personal bank loan Konnyu secured, they comprised the largest block of late cash made available to the embattled incumbent—money that was quickly used to mail a desperate smear piece aimed at Konnyu's opponent, Stanford Law Professor Tom Campbell, who won the primary election by a wide margin.

"The process dishonors Israel and all the reasons the state of Israel was brought into being," says Michael Lerner, editor of the Berkeley-based *Tikkun* magazine, a fast-growing nationally circulated journal of Jewish thought. Although he says he is unfamiliar with the specifics regarding Konnyu, Lerner says the affair follows a national pattern of "troubling alliances" between pro-Israel forces and the extreme right-wing of the GOP.

While adopting low profile methods of supporting candidates for national office might make sense for some unpopular industries seeking legislative favors, using the same tactic to advance the cause of Israel makes Jews like Lerner uneasy. They contend that, unlike the big oil PACs that work to open the coastline to drilling with names like "Save the Coastline" or the insurance PACs which protect the profits of the insurance industry camouflaged behind names like "Committee for Fair Insurance Rates," pro-Israel PACs have no reason to be ashamed. In addition, there is apparently considerable disagreement among Jews about what criteria pro-Israel PACs should use to distinguish friend from foe.

"I don't understand why they didn't give the money to Anna [Eshoo]," says Andrea Leiderman, county Democratic party chair and an activist in Jewish causes. Eshoo won the Democratic nomination for the seat currently occupied by Konnyu.

Leiderman is not the only one miffed by Konnyu's unlikely fiscal backing. Harvey Koch, a Jewish Welfare Federation volunteer known for his philanthropy, also expressed surprise upon learning that Konnyu received funds earmarked for supporting Israel.

"I have no idea why they did what they did, but it is important to re-

member that Tom Campbell has also received support—and some large contributions—from Jews" and others concerned with Israel's survival, Koch says, pointing to Mervyn's founder Mervyn Morris, who serves on Campbell's Finance Committee.

The idea that the communal voice of the American Jewish community—expressed through the East Coast PACs—weighed in on Konnyu's behalf "is just not accurate," adds Robert Katz, a former Stanford business professor. Along with Koch and San Jose attorney Al Frank, Katz organized the local pro-Israel Citizens for Good Government PAC, which, like its East Coast counterpart, only makes contributions outside of the local area.

"I really don't think that's a big problem," Katz responds when asked whether long-distance cash contributions could cause donors to overlook a candidate's extreme positions on other issues. "If a candidate is good on Israel but bad on most other things, we won't support that candidate. We simply don't have enough money to contribute to everyone who votes right on Israel."

Meanwhile, in Washington, National PAC's executive director, Richard Altman, who sent Konnyu a \$5000 check the week before the election, refused numerous requests for an interview to discuss his organization's assistance to Konnyu.

"I don't know him, but he probably thinks that any publicity of this will be bad publicity," guesses Rabbi Sidney Akselrad. "By and

pro-Israel groups for their respective defeats in US Senate races. It is unknown whether Campbell's support from McCloskey, a vociferous critic of American aid to Israel and supporters of that policy, gave Konnyu the ammunition he needed to attract financing from the pro-Israel PACs—this despite Campbell's efforts to distance himself from McCloskey during the campaign.

"A politician usually remembers those who gave him money," the late Jess Unruh once observed, "but most politicians never will forget who gave money to their opponents." With Campbell's star rising in the newly-moderating GOP, it seems that the money sent to Konnyu might have done less damage to the cause of Israel if it had been given directly to the PLO.

Campbell, for his part, professes to be "unoffended" by the donation that helped Konnyu finance his controversial last-minute hit mailer. "I understand the way PACs work," the diplomatic Campbell says, adding that the contributions to Konnyu "were reflective of support for an incumbent with an established voting record on a particular set of issues."

The apparent lack of discrimination with which some pro-Israel groups, like NatPac and Hudson Valley, spend their money could hamper future efforts to raise funds in some sectors. "In the future, I'll send my money directly to the candidates I support," says David Pauleen, a self-described Zionist who, like Lerner, worries that the leadership of many establishment

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large, the efforts to advance the cause of Israel through these PACs have been pretty successful, although it appears in this case that a mistake may have been made."

In this case, the "mistake," may prove counterproductive to the PACs' own objectives. Candidate Campbell, who took staunchly pro-Israel positions during the primary race—including a pledge not to tie US aid to Israel to its policies in the disputed territories—is widely regarded as the favorite to win November's general election. And if Campbell does make it to Washington, he will arrive there knowing that the "organized Jewish lobby"—as disorganized as it appears to be—tried to cut him off at the knees during his most difficult campaign.

Two of Konnyu's predecessors in the 12th District—Pete McCloskey and Ed Zschau—are said to blame

pro-Israel groups is "too conservative" and "in bed with the most reactionary elements on the American political scene."

"For some Jews," says Toby Dershowitz of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, "there is only one issue: the survival of Israel." For others, though, support for Israel cannot be divorced from a range of other humanitarian concerns.

Tikkun's Lerner says it shouldn't be hard to come up with acceptable criteria on which to base decisions concerning communal Jewish support for political candidates. "Jews have had two concerns throughout history," he says. "Peace and justice. Those are our criteria. They must be our criteria, for if we forget them we dishonor our tradition and we dishonor Israel."

—Hal Plotkin