

The Washington Post
January 30, 2015

Bow out gracefully

It would be a mistake for Netanyahu to address Congress

by Robert Kagan

Here are five reasons Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should politely decline [House Speaker John Boehner's invitation](#) to address a joint session of Congress:

- **It's inappropriate.** It doesn't matter what good allies the United States and Israel are, and it doesn't matter how bad relations may be between Netanyahu and President Obama. Allies don't go big-footing around in each other's politics. It also doesn't matter how worthy the cause. In 1793, when [Citizen Genêt traveled through the United States](#), drumming up support for revolutionary France (and overtly violating President George Washington's policy of U.S. neutrality), he no doubt thought it was a worthy cause — and so did the many Americans, including numerous Jeffersonian Republicans and Washington opponents, who welcomed him with open arms. But it was an unacceptable intrusion into the U.S. political system. Thomas Jefferson himself, then secretary of state, took Washington's side.
- **It will damage Israel's image in the United States.** Israel enjoys a great deal of sympathy among Americans, but there is such a thing as overplaying a hand. Even among those who may be enjoying the spectacle of Obama being defied (and, by the way, patriotic Americans should not be enjoying that spectacle, no matter how they feel about Obama), when all is said and done, Netanyahu's visit may leave a sour taste. Genêt's visit ultimately did more to discredit than help France in the eyes of many Americans, even some who had otherwise been sympathetic or neutral toward the revolution.
- **It is not good for the American debate over Iran.** At the end of the day, that debate has to rest on a consideration of U.S. interests, not those of Israel. The two sets of interests may be congruent in some instances, but they are never identical, because no two nations' interests are ever identical. Israel conducts business with other countries that does not always serve U.S. foreign policy objectives. That is its prerogative. The United States is used to taking into account broader interests than its own, including those of its allies. Nevertheless, it, too, needs to make decisions based on its own calculations. Giving the Israeli prime minister the forum of a joint

session to make Israel's case on the Iran question might or might not be a good idea at a time of consensus between Congress and the president. Given that the United States is carrying out a vigorous and healthy debate over what to do about Iran, the intrusion of the Israeli prime minister only muddies the waters.

- **It is not good for Congress.** Congress already suffers from an image of excessive deference to Israel on matters of foreign policy. But Israel has no monopoly on strategic wisdom. It makes mistakes just as the United States does and all nations do. On issues such as Egypt and the broader question of supporting dictators in the Middle East, for instance, Israel always, and mistakenly, urges Congress and the administration to support autocrats who see that part of the world the way Israel does. In the case of Iran, [Israel is uniquely threatened](#) and, as a U.S. ally, it deserves a serious and appropriate hearing here. But it is a mistake for Congress to treat Israel as if it were fundamentally different from all other U.S. allies, some of whom also face dire threats.

- **It fails the Churchill test.** There was no greater friend of the United States than Winston Churchill and no better ally of the United States than Britain. Between 1939 and 1941, Churchill was desperate for deeper U.S. involvement in Britain's life-and-death struggle with Nazi Germany. The British faced at least as dire a threat then as Israel faces today — arguably more dire. No one was inviting Churchill to speak to a joint session of Congress, of course, but would Churchill even have considered accepting such an invitation without the approval of President Franklin Roosevelt? When Churchill gave his famous "[Iron Curtain](#)" speech in Fulton, Mo., in 1946, he did so as a private citizen — and, as it happened, he was escorted to the speech by President Harry Truman.

U.S. congressional leaders probably should have given this invitation more thought. Although not a violation of the letter of the Constitution, it certainly seems to violate the idea that the nation speaks with one voice on foreign policy and that foreign leaders cannot choose whether they prefer to deal with Congress or the president. Will Republicans be happy when the shoe is on the other foot, and a Democratic Congress invites foreign leaders to joint sessions in defiance of a Republican president's wishes?

But whether the congressional leadership has thought this through or not, there is still time for the Israeli prime minister to do the right thing — and decline.

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