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## New Role For Religion In American Politics: How The Evangelical Church Is Shaping The Middle-Eastern Politics In Particular In The Israeli Palestinian Conflict

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### Abstract

The longstanding political turmoil in the Middle East especially between Israelis and Palestinians attracts worldwide attention. A main player in the area is the USA. Their pro-Israeli foreign policies are highly visible especially during Republican Presidencies. Considering that the last five Republican Presidents were Evangelical Christians my concern is to clarify their religious beliefs and their relationships to the foreign policies implemented in the area. What started as a religious Puritan movement in the 16-17th centuries in England and moved to the USA later on turned into a far-right Christian political movement. Their literal interpretation of the Bible, including the belief that the Jewish people were given the land of Israel by God himself supported the Jewish Zionist movement at the turn of the century and developed their name into Christian Zionists around the 1980's. The current Trump Administration and their recent move of the USA embassy to Jerusalem, signifying the official acceptance of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the following change of discourse about the Palestinians, will be studied. I will first define and describe the two ideologies, that is, Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism followed by their historical paths focusing mainly on Christian Zionism. I will conclude by analyzing the Christian Zionists' view of modern Israel and the resulting policies.

### Keywords

Christian zionism • Israel • Evangelists • Palestine • USA

### Amerikan Siyasetinde Dinin Yeni Rolü: Evanjelik Kilisesinin Başta İsrail Filistin Sorunu Olmak Üzere Ortadoğu Politikası Üzerindeki Etkileri

### Öz

Orta Doğu'da uzun yıllardır sürmekte olan Filistin-İsrail çatışması ve siyasi kargaşa tüm dünyanın dikkatini bu bölgeye çekmektedir. Bölgedeki ana aktör olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin İsrail yanlısı politikaları özellikle Cumhuriyetçi Parti Başkanlarının yönetimi sürecinde oldukça görünür hale gelmiştir. Son beş cumhuriyetçi başkanın Hıristiyan Evanjelist olmasından yola çıkarak, bu çalışmada söz konusu coğrafi bölge için alınan dış politika kararlarında ve uygulanan politikalarda dini inançların etkilerini incelemek amaçlanmaktadır. 16. ve 17. yüzyıllarda püriten bir dini inanç olarak İngiltere'de başlayan bu hareket, ABD'ne ulaştıktan sonra aşırı sağcı Hıristiyan bir yapıya bürünmüştür. Püriten Evanjelistler İncil'i hiçbir mealini göz önünde bulundurmadan, harfi harfine okumaları üzerine yaptıkları çıkarım sonucunda İsrail'in Tanrı tarafından Yahudilere verildiğine inanarak Yahudi Siyonizmini desteklemişler ve 1980'lerde "Hıristiyan Siyonistler" olarak isimlendirilmeye başlanmışlardır. Bu makalede Hıristiyan Siyonistlerin Amerikan dış politikasına etkileri, Trump yönetiminin Amerikan Elçiliği'ni Kudüs'e taşıma kararı ve Kudüs'ün İsrail'in başkenti olduğunu resmen kabul etmesinin ardından değişen Filistin söylemi incelenmektedir. Çalışmada ilk olarak Yahudi Siyonizmi ve Hıristiyan Siyonizmi kavramsal olarak ele alınmış ve ardından Hıristiyan Siyonizminin tarihsel gelişimi anlatılmıştır. Son bölümde ise Hıristiyan Siyonistlerin modern İsrail Devleti'ne yönelik görüşleri ve bu görüşlerden yola çıkarak İsrail'e destekleri ve Amerikan dış politikasını Filistin sorunu bağlamında ne şekilde etkiledikleri incelenmektedir.

### Anahtar kelimeler

Christian zionism • Israel • Evangelists • Palestine • USA

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### **Definition of Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism**

Dr Thomas Ice defines Zionism as: "...the belief that the Jewish people have been given the land of Israel by covenant promise to God and have a current right to occupy that land. Christian Zionists are Christians who agree with this belief." (Ice, 2009, p.1)

Thus, Jewish Zionism as a separate line of thought was a movement established by Theodor Hertzl and followed by Chaim Weitzman in the establishment of the state of Israel.

It is argued that the support of the Christian Right for Israel is rooted not so much in love or sympathy for the Jewish people or guilt over anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Instead, it is more a self-serving belief that there must be a state for Jews in Palestine before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Although some argue that the sympathy the Christian Right shows towards Israel stems from the results of the Second World War and the guilt over the Holocaust, recent students of the Middle East argue that it is a preparation for the Christian Right belief of the Second coming of Jesus. Christian Zionism, a precursor to the Jewish Zionism, follows the theological thought that the scriptures are literally correct in their foretelling of the future of mankind. It accepts that Israel will be re-established in the Holy Land, including Jerusalem as its capital. This will be followed by a period of upheaval known as "Armageddon" which will bring the resurrection of Jesus. As a result, this is the precise reason for which the State of Israel should be supported. When the 1967 and 1973 wars ended with Israel's victory and the capture of Jerusalem it felt like the expected supporting evidence of their biblical prophecies. The 'Greater Israel' mentioned in the book of Genesis which includes today's Gaza and the West Bank was in the making.

Christian Zionism as a system of thought or a popular expression of evangelical faith has received little attention. The influence of evangelicals on the development of Zionism has been consistently underestimated. Christian Zionism is a global phenomenon with a political dimension. It is not limited to theology in the obvious or narrow sense. Their followers and evangelical Americans increasingly viewed Israeli security and prosperity as synonymous with USA security and prosperity and pushed for a tightening of USA-Israeli relations. (Hornstra, 2007, p.1)

A critic of the movement, Donald Wagner defines it as "a political movement within Protestant fundamentalist Christianity that views the modern state of

Israel as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy, thus deserving our unconditional economic, moral, political, and theological support.” (Wagner, 2003)

The origins of Christian Zionism lie in the theology of dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is a form of premillennialism, which asserts that the world will experience a period of worsening tribulations until Christ returns. Like many other Christians, dispensationalists believe that Christ’s return is foretold in the Old and the New Testaments’ prophecies and that the return of the Jews to Palestine is a key event in the preordained process that will lead to the Second Coming. (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, pp.132-133)

### **History of Christian Zionism**

The genesis of Christian Zionism follows the Protestant Reformation. With the English Puritans (16th and 17th century) focusing on the Hebrew Scriptures, the hope of Israel’s re-establishment in the Holy Land was reborn. The Jewish Messianic texts helped to a great extent to describe the Christian Zionists’ apocalyptic scenarios.

The foundation of the Christian Zionist movement’s ideology is mainly attributed to E. Irving and J.N. Darby’s conferences held in England and Ireland at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Sizer, 2002, pp.13-14) Darby in particular divided the theological history in particular periods called dispensations.

In his PhD thesis Sizer (2002) mentions six key areas of the Christian Zionist ideology, in other words, Darby’s dispensations:

- 1. Chosen People: blessing Israel*
- 2. Restorationism: facilitating Jewish emigration*
- 3. Eretz Israel: supporting the settlement program*
- 4. Jerusalem: lobbying for international recognition of Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel*
- 5. Temple: funding the rebuilding of the temple*
- 6. The Future: opposing the peace process, exacerbating relations in the Arab world and hastening Armageddon. (Sizer, 2002, p.225)*

Following these areas, it is possible to explain the chosen people's fate as the establishment of Israel in modern times; restorationism as the encouragement and support of the Jewish immigration to the Holy Land ending up with supporting the disputed settlement program and promoting the idea of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and rebuilding of the Temple as the crown jewel. The final touch, Armageddon will come if and when the Arab Israeli relations sour, ending up with total war.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Puritan settlers in the USA facilitated the dissemination of their ideology mainly because of the common English language. Central to their ideology is God's covenant with Israel. Although the Bible predicted that the Jews will return to Israel it was thought that this would be the result of their own efforts without the intervention of the USA.

One of the memorable names in this area is Blackstone, a Methodist turned Evangelist. He tried to get Jews and Christians together in Chicago (1890) to discuss the possible cooperation. It turned out that the Jewish camp led by Rabbi Emil Hirsh refused the idea of the return to the Holy Land because they considered themselves a religious community rather than a nation. Unknown to Blackstone the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities of Europe also rejected the idea because of the prophecy of the Messiah's arrival previous to the establishment of a Jewish state. In other words, according to the Jewish prophecy the Messiah comes before the state of Israel is established. That is the reason for some of the ultra-orthodox communities in Israel today refusing to acknowledge Israel and side with the Palestinians. Blackstone continued with his work through the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century influencing Woodrow Wilson who endorsed a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

At the same time the 19<sup>th</sup> century sees the rise in immigration of the Jews to Palestine due to serious anti-Semitic disturbances in central and eastern Europe. D. Lloyd-George, the then prime minister of Britain and J. Balfour, the organizer of the declaration under his name were both devout believers. (Tuchman, 1957) However, neither were attached to the Christian Zionist movement as known today.

The above mentioned immigration of the Jews to Palestine was not only a clear indication of the Biblical prediction being accomplished but served the British interests in the Middle East. A Jewish homeland in this region would facilitate the British control of Palestine and give better access to India and protect its trade in the Persian Gulf. They opened the first European Consulate in Jerusalem in 1838. Two years later, the foreign minister Lord Palmerston

planted the idea of a homeland for the Jews in a letter published in the Times (17/08/1840) (Tuchman, 1957, p.176)

In 1917 the Balfour Declaration made the Christian Zionist project a political reality gaining support from the British government and legitimizing the European Jewish Zionist movement internationally. The USA, with president Woodrow Wilson, a Presbyterian minister's son, at the helm was in full support of the project too. (Ice, 2005, p.14) British General Allenby's capture of Jerusalem in 1918 was seen as the victory which took the Holy City from the hands of the Muslim Turks entrusting it to the Christians and at the same time gave legitimacy to the British plan of conquering Palestine because of its strategic value.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire was another indication for the Christian believers that Israel was going to be restored to its rightful place. The same Puritans encouraged the English speaking world to support T. Herzl's Zionist movement at the turn of the century. (Watson, p.44-45)

During the 1920's resistance to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine escalated through the years and was seen a major setback to the Dispentionalists since the Holy Land was promised only to the Jews and did not include the Muslim Arabs. (Weber, 2004, p.167) In the following years the arguments followed the legality of the claims albeit only from their point of view, that is not taking the Arab inhabitants' point of view or legal rights into consideration. Even after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 the fact that Israel did not control all of Jerusalem was a problem because the expected Messiah was supposed to enter Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.

Dispensionalists influence on the Middle Eastern politics can be observed in the following years' incidents involving Israel and the invariable USA support of Israel. During the cold war the USA sided with the Israeli cause to oppose the communist attempts of rapprochement from the USSR since Israel was established on socialist principles. "The "theo-political alliance" between conservative American Christians and a right-wing Israeli government was regarded as a novelty when it was announced." (Goldman, 2018, p.124)

The term 'Christian Zionism' first appears in print in 1980 in the New York Times. As Mearsheimer and Walt claim several organizations with the sole purpose of supporting Israel were formed. There are different names for the Christian Zionists in America such as: (Goldman, 2018, p.167) 'Armageddon Lobby', 'Christian AIPAC' (American Israel Public Affairs Committee),

Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and Christian Friends of Israeli Communities (CFOIC). In particular the Christians United for Israel in 2006 (CUFI) with founder Pastor Hagee at its helm claimed, “We support Israel because all other nations were created by an act of men, but Israel was created by an act of God!”. He claims to be the largest pro-Israel group in America, with their over three million members, endorsed Donald Trump for president in May 2016. (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, pp.134-135) It is possible that Trump’s Islamophobia might come from the former head of CUFI late pastor Jerry Falwell’s anti-Islamic views. In 1980, Falwell also became the first Gentile (non-Jew) to be awarded the Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky medal for Zionist excellence by Israel’s Prime Minister, Menachem Begin.

Hagee was followed by others amongst which the late Ed McAteer, founder of the evangelical Religious Roundtable and a major organizing force in the Christian Right, once declared that “every grain of sand between the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, and the Mediterranean Sea belongs to the Jews. This includes the West Bank and Gaza.” Hence Christian Zionists oppose a two-state solution or any other form of territorial concession to the Palestinians. (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, p.134)

### **Christian Zionists Involvement in the Israeli Palestinian Conflict**

According to Haija, the lengthy Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major problem for the Middle-East and other Muslim states. Considering the importance of the USA’s involvement and influence in the region it is crucial to clarify USA’s foreign policies’ sources since the ‘Armageddon Lobby’ or the Christian Zionist group forms a considerable part of the Republican Party. (Haija, 2006, p.76)

The centrality of Israel in the USA’s foreign policies is very visible especially during election speeches where no candidate swayed away from defending the Israeli position. This is usually explained by the facts that Israel is a strategic asset in the area and a partner in the war on terror in the Middle East or that it shares the same values as the USA. However, keeping in mind, the fact that Israel is becoming a liability to the USA, especially in the development of anti-American feeling in the Middle East, it begs the question of the reason for this continued interest and support of Israel. Mearsheimer and Walt suggest that the American Jewish lobby made of different components and not always in complete agreement with each other include Jews as well as non-Jews. It is among those that we come across the Christian Zionist group. (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, pp.1-18)

Mainstream Christians and liberal Jews generally support a so-called two-state solution consisting of a sovereign Palestinian state side by side with Israel but would also welcome a bi-national state in which Jews, Arab Christians, and Arab Muslims could all live together under one roof, in a single state. Christian Zionism, on the other hand, rejects solutions like these, considering it as an obstacle to peace in the region and a challenge to US foreign and national security policy.

The Christian Right, a considerable political force in the USA, which seeks to influence legislation and foreign policy uses the Christian Zionism ideology to mobilize political support for the USA foreign policy in the Holy Land. It motivates and shapes the viewpoint of mainline American Protestantism, as well as the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox denominations. (Kiracofe, 2009, p.xiv) It is a complex, controversial and influential movement and has had a significant effect on U.S. foreign policy during the Republican rule. Christian Zionists' power regarding the Middle East policies in the U.S. has been underestimated. The potential influence of Christian Zionists' is significantly greater than that of the American Jewish lobby mainly because of their numerical size. In other words, the Christian Zionists constitute 26.3% of the total voting power as opposed to the 1.7% of Jewish voters (Pew Research Center 2008). (Mohr, 2013, p.290) Apart from their numerical majority

“Christian Zionism provides biblical justification for greater U.S. intervention in the Middle East. It is deeply mistrustful of the United Nations and the European Community and actively opposes the implementation of international law and the right of Palestinians to a sovereign state alongside Israel.” (Sizer, 2005)

When applied to the current USA political scene the Christian Zionists influence is considerable. They actively question and challenge every move to a peaceful process since this would mean the division of Jerusalem and the delay of Armageddon. (Kiracofe, 2009, pp.173-175)

The establishment of Israel in 1948 became a ‘theological marker’ fulfilling the biblical prophecy or dispensationalism and its problematic relationship with the surrounding Arab world is of utmost importance for the Christian Zionists. Anybody who is against Israel is demonized, with Islam in the first place. (Prior, 2005, pp.131-132) Israel is essential to their belief that the second coming of Christ will only take place following Armageddon and the Chosen People fighting the final battle at the mount of Megiddo. ‘Jerusalem will be the spiritual center of the entire world.... All people of the earth will come annually to worship Jesus who will rule there’ (Lindsey, 2005, p.53)

Lindsey's "The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon (1980)" was one of the first examples of how dispensationalists could blend prophecy and politics if they put their minds to it. Lindsey claims: they have witnessed the biblical prophecies come true "The birth of Israel. The decline in American power and morality.... The threat of war in the Middle East.... The Bible foretells the signs that precede Armageddon....." (Weber, 2004, p.197) President Reagan, along with several members of the United States Congress and the Pentagon, became clients of Lindsey's consulting business..

The Christian Zionist rapprochement to the American Jewish lobby is thought to start around the late 1970's according to Haija. At the same time Israel began to perceive the Christian Zionists. (Haija, 2006, p.76) In the US as a good support in the internal and external political arena. The capture of Jerusalem during the Yom Kippur War in 1973 was the conclusive evidence of the Christian Zionists predictions. When Israel started a settlement program Christian Zionists organization lobbied the USA government and sent significant amounts of money to encourage the expansion in Judea and Samaria (current West Bank). Although the international community and the UN tried to prevent these illegal settlements (they are a serious threat to any peaceful solution between Israel and the Palestinians) the Christian Zionists very rarely support or work for any peaceful solution "peace initiatives are regularly described as 'appeasement' or Satanic". (Steiner and Lundberg, 2015, p. 120) Although Christian Zionists are seen as friends of Israel their ultimate belief is "When the 'end-times' comes God will exterminate two-thirds of his chosen people. This belief is inherently anti-Semitic, and the actions of the Christian Zionist movement will spell disaster for the Jewish people." (Kiracofe, 2009, p.180)

The evangelical Christian constituency was a major factor in the election of Jimmy Carter to the Presidency in 1976, of Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, and of George W. Bush, all three re-born Christians. Carter's concern for human rights for the Palestinians and his use of 'Palestinian Homeland' was one of the issues which changed the majority of the vote to Reagan. (Christian Science Monitor, 1977, p.137)

In June 1979, Reverend Jerry Falwell organized the Moral Majority, a conservative political lobbying group that was pro-life, pro-family, pro-Israel and favored a strong national defense. (Haija, 2006, p.76)

Falwell influence on Reagan is recorded as "consistent with the ideologies of dispensationalist theology and that Reagan applied this theology when



making policy decisions”. Haija supports his argument with “In an intimate phone conversation with AIPAC director Tom Dine, President Reagan was quoted as saying, ‘You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if we’re the generation that’s going to see that come about’ . . . . Reagan were consistent with the ideologies of dispensationalist theology and that Reagan applied this theology when making policy decisions.” (Haija, 2006, p.88)

The subsequent president G.W. Bush tried to use some diplomacy but was not welcomed by the Republican Party. By the time Bush Jr. took over the presidency the neo-conservative ideologies favoring military solutions culminated particularly after the 9/11 incident. Any thought of peaceful solution was swiftly forgotten.

“Any national agenda that would contradict God’s plan, any peace overture that would weaken Israel’s hold on the land such as the promise of a Palestinian state or the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Gaza or the West Bank, any decision that stands in the way of this dramatic stage-setting is not a plan that Christian Zionists view as blessed by God.” (Burge, 2014, p.189)

President G. W. Bush junior was also a self-admitted born-again Christian and the Islamophobia of the Christian Zionist discourse is apparent in Bush’s administration description of the “axis of evil” and its “crusader” mindset. (Morrison, 2007, p.58)

After the 9/11 the Israeli Palestinian conflict became equal to the war on terrorism. Although Bush junior was pro peaceful settlement at the outset the pressure of Reverend Falwell and his supporters changed his attitude towards Israeli politics in the Middle East.

According to Morrison one of the most important home nurtured political threat is

“the prolific spread of a brand of fundamentalist Christian “End Times” pseudo-theology linked to massive support—military and financial—for the state of Israel. The threat goes by the name Christian Zionism.” (Morrison, 2007, p.59)

It is not surprising that in these circumstances the **CZs** oppose radical Islamist movements and side with Israel. The apocalyptic war between Israel and the Arab world is the precursor to the promised Kingdom of God.

Christian Zionists managed to influence the current White House through the positioning of Vice President Mike Pence who, amongst others, is an “ardent

Christian Zionist”. Saleh Mohd, Afandi point out Pence’s website declaration which says: “In the year 2000 when I was first selected to Congress, Israel was already my priority to me . . . I am concerned with the defense and the promotion of the interests of the state and the people of Israel.” (Salleh, 2011, p.144)

Pence repeated his allegiance to Israel during the AIPAC Policy Conference in 2009. His support for Jerusalem as the official Israeli capital is evident since 1995. He also mentions his support for Israel being not only political but because of his religious beliefs during an interview with Barbara Victor in 2003 saying:

“I ultimately believe that Israel was forged equally out of the hearts of American Jews for the horror of the Holocaust, as much as it is the dream of American Christians for the promises of God to reappear on Earth as the Messiah and King.” (Victor, 2005, pp.207-208)

Pence’s keynote speech at the annual summit of CUFI signals a new era of Christian Zionist influence in the White House and marks a fundamental change towards Christian Zionism and the very fate of the United States is prophetically linked with Israel.

U.S. Vice President Pence is accompanied in his efforts by people such as Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, his daughter Sara Huckabee Sanders, now the White House press secretary, and Sara Palin who wields significant influence in the Trump administration and are ardent Christian Zionists. It was Pence who pledged that the Trump administration would move the US embassy to Jerusalem. On 6 December 2018, Trump explicitly denied any lingering hope for a two-state solution:

“After more than two decades of waivers, we are no closer to a lasting peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Therefore, I have determined that it is time to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel officially. It would be folly to assume that repeating the same formula would now produce a different or better result,” (Strong, 2018)

Trump’s siding with Israel is evident in his choosing the Nakba Day for the USA Embassy’s move to Jerusalem and his statement “The USA has no better friends anywhere than Israel”. (Cortellessa, 2018)

Jonathan Cook claims that

“It was primarily for the sake of these Christian Zionists that Trump moved the US embassy to Jerusalem. And it was why two evangelical pastors with a history

of anti-Semitic remarks, John Hagee and Robert Jeffress, were called on to offer their blessings *at the opening ceremony*.

Trump's indebtedness to the evangelicals is one reason to be worried about his policies in the region. The Christian Zionists have no interest in fairness, justice or international law. Rather, they are prepared to inflame tensions in the Middle East – and even trigger Armageddon itself – if they think it might benefit Israel and further God's prophecy." (Cook, 2018)

### **Conclusion**

Until recently very little attention has been devoted to explaining the role and influence of religious organizations such as the Christian Zionists and how they have attempted to exert influence on USA's foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East. There are today over 200 different evangelical organizations committed to Christian Zionism in the USA. They are the major component of the pro-Israel lobby in the USA, lobbies the White House and Congress on foreign policy based upon its particular interpretation of the Bible. Few initiatives have been made to comprehend or integrate the reflective factor of the American Christian Zionist's religious beliefs and its dynamic political activism in influencing USA's foreign policy towards Israel.

Although Christian Zionism in its latest form, is a late arrival on the political scene it has shaped the USA foreign policies during Republican Presidencies. The USA involvement in the Middle East and its obvious Israeli support focused on the strategic placement of Israel, economic reasons, the shared western values and partly the guilt felt about the holocaust. However, since the 1980's Christian Zionist ideology is apparent in their support of Israel.

Grace Halsell summarizes the message of the Christian Zionist in this way: "every act taken by Israel is orchestrated by God, and should be condoned, supported, and even praised by the rest of us." (Halsell, 1988, p.31)

The Christian Zionists have reinforced hardline attitudes in Israel and the United States and have made it more difficult for American leaders to put pressure on Israel. What had started as a relationship with a friendly nation changed after 9/11. The ensuing Iraq war started the rumors of Christian Zionist involvement into Bush's administration albeit without supporting evidence. However, their organizational skills and voting power made them an enemy to be reckoned with or an extremely valuable friend during elections. Having said that according to Goldman "The political clout of evangelicals and other conservative Christians has declined in consequence." (Goldman,

2018, p.176) Despite their impact during Trump's election to the Presidency Goldman claims that they are now one among several interest groups. However according to the results of 2016 exit polls 80% of white evangelical Christians voted for Trump and begs the question if Goldman is right in his assumption.

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