

# Commentary

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JANUARY 2025 POLITICS & IDEAS

## Don Pacifico Trump

Jewish Commentary

by **Meir Y. Soloveichik**

**H**ENRY JOHN TEMPLE, KNOWN MORE POPULARLY AS LORD PALMERSTON, was one of the great statesmen of the Victorian era, defined by his steadfast faith in the superiority of England among the nations of the world. When a gentleman from France, seeking to compliment Palmerston, reflected that, had he not been born a Frenchman, he would have wished to be an Englishman, Palmerston reportedly replied: “If I had not been born an Englishman, I should wish to have been an Englishman.” At times, this patriotic instinct led him astray, manifesting itself in his dislike of the rising power that was the United States, and in his hope that the Civil War across the ocean would weaken America. But at other times, his confidence in his country produced some of the most enduring rhetoric of his age—words that are largely unknown by Americans and deserve to be rediscovered in our current moment.

In 1848, a series of anti-Semitic riots took place in Athens, and a Sephardic Jew by the name of Don Pacifico issued claims for damages to his property. Pacifico had never set foot in England, but he had been born in Gibraltar, and therefore submitted his case as a British subject to the government of Lord John Russell, in which Palmerston was serving as foreign secretary. Palmerston seized upon these claims, as he had already been angered by other purported grievances by the Greek government, and he ordered the British fleet to blockade Greek ports until Pacifico’s grievances were addressed.

The House of Lords passed a resolution condemning Palmerston's policy and that of the government he served. As the issue came to a head in the House of Commons, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who at the time deeply disliked Palmerston, were certain that his days in government were numbered. But in the Commons, rhetoric mattered, and the grievances of one Jew, sparking what came to be known as the "Don Pacifico affair," lay at the center of what emerged as one of the most important foreign-policy addresses in British history.

Palmerston spoke originally from notes, but, as the historian James Chambers tells us, the foreign secretary had memorized the final passages of his address, which spoke of the protection a citizen of Rome once received around the world.



I therefore fearlessly challenge the verdict which this House, as representing a political, a commercial, a constitutional country, is to give on the question now brought before it; whether the principles on which the foreign policy of Her Majesty's Government has been conducted, and the sense of duty which has led us to think ourselves bound to afford protection to our fellow subjects abroad, are proper and fitting guides for those who are charged with the Government of England; and whether, as the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say *Civis Romanus sum* [I am a Roman citizen]; so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England, will protect him against injustice and wrong.

Whatever the legal nature of Pacifico's claims, we must marvel not only at Palmerston's rhetoric but also at the historical context in which it was delivered. At the time, Jews in England were not equals; they could not serve in the very parliament in which Palmerston spoke. It would have been surprising for such a significant figure as Palmerston to be exercised about Jewish rights in his own country, let alone on the other end of the European continent. Yet the principle that Palmerston enunciated—that British subjects everywhere deserved to be protected by the country to which they were connected—electrified his audience and saved his career.

To read these words, and to marvel at Palmerston's stalwart statements about what a country owes its citizens, is to wonder: What if the Biden administration's officials had reflected, in the past year, one ounce of this outrage at the fact that American citizens were being held hostage in Gaza? What if an American version of a Palmerstonian spirit had truly led an effort to wield American power on their behalf? It may seem unrealistic to expect that American officials would, in this day and age, speak in so pugnacious a manner as Palmerston's. But a post by the incoming president on his Truth Social website reminds us of an attitude about American power that remains a possibility—and recalls the Don Pacifico affair. More remarkably, the focus of this rhetoric is not only on the Americans being held hostage, but on all the innocents imprisoned by monsters in Gaza. Donald Trump wrote:



Please let this TRUTH serve to represent that if the hostages are not released prior to January 20, 2025, the date that I proudly assume Office as President of the United States, there will be ALL HELL TO PAY in the Middle East, and for those in charge who perpetrated these atrocities against Humanity. Those responsible will be hit harder than anybody has been hit in the long and storied History of the United States of America. **RELEASE THE HOSTAGES NOW!**

The linguistic style, it is true, is slightly different from Palmerston's, but the spirit is the same; and, as many have noted, one does not have to be an ardent admirer of the president-elect to understand that these words reflect what should have been the attitude of the current American president, his foreign-policy team, and leaders around the world.

The Don Pacifico affair is not the only aspect of Palmerston's career worth rediscovering; his own approach to freedom and foreign policy has much to teach us today. Palmerston did not believe that free societies could be created overnight, but he did believe that British power ought to be used in celebration, and at times in the defense, of societies that sought to be free. Remarks in the House of Commons about British foreign policy, cited by Chambers, serve as a worthy polestar for the United States today:



Our duty—our vocation—is not to enslave, but to set free, and I may say, without any vain-glorious boast, or without great offense to anyone, that we stand at the head of a moral, social, and political civilization. Our task is to lead the way and direct the march of other nations. I do not think we ought to goad on the unwilling, or force forward the reluctant; but when we see people battling against difficulties and struggling against obstacles in the pursuit of their rights, we may be permitted to encourage them with our sympathy...and even, if occasion require, to lend them a helping hand.

This, for America, remains true today. And it is all the more true when it comes to those who have been brutally kidnapped and dwell in darkness and despair. And that is why Trump's Palmerstonian post deserves to be celebrated, as we pray that it will have an effect—and that it embodies a sign of American policy yet to come.

*Photo: Herbert Fry/Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

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