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***"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."***

*A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker*

May 17, 2002



**"God protect me from my friends, I'll take care of my enemies"**  
Voltaire

**C**ountries do not have "friends." Truth be known, most people do not have as many friends as they think they have, and most of us just have acquaintances and close acquaintances.

But, for certain, countries do not have friends, and so each time I see someone on TV talking about Israel being our "only friend" in the Middle East, or asking if Saudi Arabia is a "friend or foe" I cringe.

Countries cannot afford to have, or be, friends. No nation should so tie the future of its population to the exigencies of another nation. Countries have national interests, and sometimes those national interests coincide with the national interests of another nation – and sometimes they do not.

The more closely the culture of two countries coincide, the more likely they are to be near to each other on the friend continuum. In my many years in real estate I have determined that 60% of the people with whom I come in contact are just nice folks whom I would like as a neighbor. Thirty percent are eccentric, but they are benign eccentrics, and I can deal with them easily because I am eccentric. Ten percent of the people are mean, crazy or stupid – and it is likely that anyone with one of those maladies has all three simultaneously. I don't need to deal with them, and I don't.

That distribution gets turned on its head with nations. Our nation would only choose, if it could choose, to have

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a couple of countries on its borders. Canada would make the cut. Mexico would not. (At one point, when I was tracking such things regularly during the Cold War, Mexico voted against the US position in the United Nations more often than did the Soviet Union!)

Saudi Arabia would not even be close. I don't know about Israel, because Israel has been under siege for so long that it has never had a "normal" day – but they would not be on my short list for a neighbor.

Israel and the United States certainly have more-closely-aligned national goals than most countries, and Israel is closer to the U.S. than most on the friend continuum, but I have a feeling that after the 1967 Israeli attack on the USS Liberty –34 American sailors killed, 172 injured – the President called Israel and calmly said, "That's One!" After the Jonathan Pollard spy episode the President called and said, "That's two!"

But Israel is a democracy...a cantankerous democracy, that's true, but a real democracy in a sea of feudal monarchs and despots. Israel is a modern nation in an entire continent of countries which would look on the radical Islamic concept of a 1400 AD ideal as an improvement! But a "friend"? (See USS Liberty and Jonathan Pollard, above.)

Certainly the Saudi's are NOT our friends, just trading partners. No, Israel is the closest thing we have to a friend in the Middle East, but that is comparing them only with many enemies and a lot of non-entities. Who wouldn't want to support Israel against those countries who support our enemies?

The U.S. has only two "friends" – Canada and Great Britain – and those are best described as "conditional friends."

(P.S. France isn't even close on the "friends" continuum.)



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