

Political maneuvers

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

Media, religion and politics have a way of smashing into one another in rich and sometimes perverse ways. This story about one of those encounters involves three men: Harvard professor Richard Marius, *New Republic* editor/publisher Martin Peretz and Vice President Al Gore. It deals with the ugly subject of anti-Semitism, or more accurately, a false charge of anti-Semitism.

The story begins in 1992 when Richard Marius volunteered to help Vice President Al Gore write speeches. The two men shared common backgrounds: both were Tennessee Southern Baptists with a commitment to scholarship and public service. Marius studied at two Southern Baptist seminaries for his theology degree—New Orleans and Louisville—and earned an additional degree in religious studies at Yale. He once said that his onetime Christian fundamentalism had made him a strong critic of the political influence of the Christian right and that it inspired, in part, a speech on religious freedom written for Gore. Marius wrote scholarly books on Martin Luther and Thomas More, as well as several novels.

He sometimes wrote speeches for Gore on very short notice (five in the week of the 1993 inauguration). One of Marius's more memorable speeches was delivered by the vice president at Madison Square Garden on April 18, 1993, the 50th anniversary of the uprising of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. The theme of that speech was inspired by Marius's memory of a famous photograph of a young Jewish boy in Warsaw "with his hands raised over his head, walking at the head of a long, doomed line of Jews marching out of the smoke and ruin of the Ghetto."

Martin Peretz's *New Republic* columns often reflect his strong pro-Israel stance. Peretz was a professor of Gore's at Harvard, and has been a strong influence on Gore over the years. Peretz took Gore on his first trip to Israel. In 1993 Peretz too submitted a draft speech for the Warsaw ghetto uprising anniversary. In this case the bulk of the speech was from Marius, with one paragraph included from the Peretz draft. According to Marius, a Gore staff member reported that "Peretz exploded when he discovered that I had written the speech for Madison Square

Garden. Peretz had told the VP that I was an anti-Semite.”

Marius told his staff contact that he knew where the charge came from. In 1992 he had written a review of *Season of Stones: Living in a Palestinian Village* for the Harvard alumni magazine. Helen Winternitz, a Jewish author, had lived a year in a village on the occupied West Bank. Marius wrote: “Winternitz’s account of the brutality of the Shin Bet, the Israeli secret police, is eerily similar to the stories of the Gestapo, the *Geheimstaatspolizei* in Nazi-occupied territories in World War II—arbitrary arrests in the middle of the night, imprisonment without trial, beatings, refined tortures, murder, punishment of the families of suspects.”

Marius assumed that his review prompted Peretz’s allegation of anti-Semitism. There is no indication that Gore took that allegation seriously, or that his staff ever brought it to his attention. Marius was popular with other staff members; they called him their “poet,” for giving Gore’s speeches such lyrical and emotional content. Gore and Marius remained close over the three years following the publication of the review. Marius recalled that at a Harvard graduation Gore greeted him with, “You are our savior!”—a reference to the speeches written for him and for Tipper Gore.

In 1995 Gore offered Marius a full-time job as a White House speech writer. Marius hesitated. He liked his voluntary status and wasn’t eager to leave Harvard and Boston. But the vice president persuaded him to take a two-year leave. According to both Marius and the *Washington Post*, Peretz heard of the appointment and sent Gore a copy of the review.

Peretz told the *Post*: “Once the vice president knew [about the review] he had to figure out if he wanted someone who believed that on his staff.” “That,” of course, was anti-Semitism. Marius later wrote that a Gore staff member informed him that “Peretz had told the VP that I was an anti-Semite.” When I asked one of Marius’s academic colleagues about the charge, he responded: “A charge of anti-Semitism would be ludicrous. I have no idea about Richard’s position regarding Israel, but a critical stance toward Israel is a far cry from anti-Semitism. Richard was no anti-Semite.”

Peretz’s delivery of the review to the vice president had its desired effect. Gore told a staff member to call Marius and tell him he no longer had a job at the White House. Stunned, Marius had to ask Harvard administrators if he could have his job back. He never wrote another speech for Gore.

Richard Marius died at the age of 66, in November 1999, of pancreatic cancer. His obituary in the *New York Times*, which referred at length to the charge of anti-Semitism in connection with the White House job, made no reference to Marius's most recent book on Martin Luther. The Associated Press obituary did refer to the Luther book, but devoted more attention to the anti-Semite reference. None of the obits mentioned what was well known in scholarly circles: that Marius castigated Luther for his anti-Semitic writings. Also missing was any reference to Gore's Holocaust speech, largely written by Marius. Had Gore acknowledged Marius as the author of that speech at the time of his death, he could easily have refuted the allegation of anti-Semitism against Marius.

In his recently published biography *Gore: A Political Life*, former senior ABC News correspondent Bob Zelnick writes that Marius had no history of anti-Semitism and adds that "most [of Gore's staff] felt Marius had been wronged and that the vice president had acted to keep Peretz happy rather than to protect his office."

At Peretz's 60th-birthday celebration in New York City, Vice President Gore was busy keeping Peretz happy by adding his celebrity presence to the event. In the August issue of *Brill's Content*, Robert Schmidt reports that Peretz told former *New Republic* editor Hendrik Hertzberg that he had four goals in life: to get rid of the Soviet Union, end affirmative action, see a strong and secure Israel and get Al Gore elected president. Hertzberg recalls that Peretz then added, "I've got three out of four."