

Darius Jones & Jarrod Jordon

AIPAC Policy Conference 2009

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Jarrod Jordon: Good evening. Darius and I have been friends since college. After graduation, we started an organization whose mission was to identify and cultivate the next generation of America's leaders at historically black colleges and universities. Vanguard Leadership Group is the name of this ever-emerging fellowship. Keenly interested in foreign policy, Darius and I had heard of AIPAC and its persuasive stance on the U.S.-Israel relationship. We agree. However, we were unsure of how we could assist such an established and successful advocacy movement. The answer came when a mutual friend of ours, who had traveled on an AIPAC mission to Israel, invited us to the 2008 policy conference.

Darius Jones: We accepted the offer, and the experience was truly transformative. Like most of you, Jarrod and I were in the audience last year when the now 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, stood on this very stage and without equivocation called the U.S.-Israel relationship sacrosanct. And as President Obama spoke from the core of his convictions, my own longstanding sentiments on the issue could not have found higher validation. I turned to the other members of the Vanguard Leadership Group seated nearby me at that moment, and saw a similar reverence in their eyes, for we understand, and we deeply appreciate the time, the talent, and the treasure that Jewish Americans contributed to a victorious civil rights movement.

In our talks with the next generation of black leaders, Jarrod and I assert that there would likely not be a Colin Powell, neither a Condoleeza nor a Susan Rice, and most assuredly not a Barack Obama had there not first been an Andrew Goodman and a Michael Schwerner. These were two idealistic and courageous young men, who along with a third valiant soul, James Chaney, made the ultimate sacrifice for a just society. Each of us lives in an entirely different world on account of the price they paid, a world now of seemingly infinite possibilities. Now, as the Jewish people urgently advocate for the security of their homeland, Jarrod and I found our efforts animated by that same resurgent spirit of solidarity between our people.

Jarrod Jordon: The conference also brought an issue with potentially dire implications to our attention. The subject of Iran's drive towards nuclear proliferation dominated policy conference in 2008, just rightly as it tops our lobbying agenda again this year. Much of the detailed information we learned from various experts was new to us, and quite frankly ominous. We'd left Washington believing that Iran's leader was intent upon acquiring the knowledge, and the know-how, to make good on his threats against America and Israel.

Darius Jones: In truth, it seemed to Jarrod and I that perhaps the issue was too far beyond our reach to make an impact. For more than a decade, the United States Congress has passed half a dozen pieces of legislation, and introduced numerous resolutions and letters in an effort to thwart Iran's drive towards nuclear weapons. Additionally, the United Nations Security Council has

passed three separate resolutions, and successive White House administrations have offered both carrots and sticks in an effort to temper an obstinate regime. These cumulative actions have indeed slowed Iran, but what could either of us do to make an additional impact?

Jarrold Jordan: Like many of you, we heard something else at last year's conference -- the inspiring stories of local leaders around the country who realized that their state's pension funds were invested in Iran's energy sector. Folks, the equation is simple. Stop the money, and you stop Iran's ability to wage nuclear war against Israel and any other country that believes in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Darius Jones: We were determined to have our voices heard on this issue. We shared our knowledge about the Iranian threat with others, and mobilize a cadre of conscientious students and alumni from historically black colleges and universities in Atlanta. Together, our contingent successfully lobbied the Atlanta City Council to introduce legislation that would divest Atlanta -- the home of the civil rights movement -- from companies that would do business with -- in the Iranian energy sector. And ladies and gentlemen, I'm proud to report that an Iranian divestment passed unanimously in the Atlanta City Council in December, just in time for Hannukah.

Jarrold Jordan: And just last month, DeKalb County, an affluent urban county which neighbors Atlanta, also passed unanimously an Iranian divestment resolution following another successful Vanguard lobbying campaign.

Darius Jones: But there's more. Recently we met with the President of Clark University, Dr. Carlton Brown, on the subject of Iranian divestment on black college campuses. Our goal is to have our alma mater become the first university in the nation to divest its endowment funds from businesses currently engaged in the Iranian energy sector. And we are confident that other municipalities and colleges will follow.

Inspired by the past, hopeful for the future, Vanguard Leadership Group is determined to keep pushing forward with this activism. Ladies and gentlemen, this is our story, one now written into an increasingly tale of diverse pro-Israel activism. Fifteen states and three other municipalities have passed Iranian divestment, each of whom who have their own inspiring story, and we thank you for allowing us to share ours.

Jarrold Jordan: And before we leave, I just wanted to make one other comment. I just wanted to say, from the bottom of my heart, to each and every one of you who support AIPAC's important work, please continue. For it has provided pro-Israel citizen activists like us with the skills, the knowledge, the training, and most importantly the inspiration to in our own way help change our world. Thank you.