

**WISDOM TRANSCRIPT:** 9:59 minutes

On April 9, 1975, Max Fisher had an important meeting scheduled in the White House with his good friend, President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

The meeting was critical to Max because President Ford had announced his plan to “begin a reassessment of United States policy in the (Mideast) region, including ... relations with Israel.”

The potential for policy reassessment had shocked Israeli politicians and worried American Jewish leaders.

By 1975, the Israelis had grown to count on Max. He had played a critical role during the 1973 Yom Kippur War because of his unprecedented access to both Prime Minister Golda Meir and President Richard Nixon.

During the first week of the war, the Egyptians and Syrians had caused severe damage to the Israeli military and their equipment. Israel’s U.S. ambassador, Simcha Dinitz contacted Max daily with messages from Golda Meir imploring Max to convince Nixon to re-arm Israel.

Max went to the Oval Office and presented a letter to President Nixon from the Presidents of the Jewish Conference. “Please send the Israeli what they need,” Fisher told Nixon. “You can’t let them be destroyed.”

Nixon agreed and within a week of the start of the Yom Kippur War, the US began an airlift that ultimately delivered 22,000 tons of equipment. The Israelis prevailed.

But, by 1975, relations between the two countries was becoming more strained. The US had been a staunch ally of Israel but the Ford administration was wavering. Max knew his timing was critical.

Max had met with Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin a few days earlier in Israel. Henry Kissinger’s recent shuttle diplomacy was yielding no results.

Max was certain that discussions between the US and Israel over plans for a lasting peace with Egypt had to take place in an environment of mutual trust and understanding.

His goal on April 9<sup>th</sup> was to convince the President that this was possible.

*PETER GOLDEN:*

*Well, President Ford trusted him because he knew him so long. And what he’ll tell you is that, Max is a straight shooter. And in general with Max, if you want to have influence with the President, tell him the truth. This idea of this complicated court... everyone went*

*around trying to give his story.. there's some of that in politics. But Max stayed away from that. You have to understand, what Max was looking to do was to be involved. He certainly didn't need to be friends with the President to make a lot of money. And he certainly didn't need to be in politics because he got to go out and eat at fancy restaurants. Don't forget, a lot of the things that drive people, by this time.. by certainly.. by the time Gerry Ford is President.. are not in Max's life. He's made more money than he's ever going to need. He.. he's achieved all kinds of things, hundreds of honors. For Max it was being involved. It was.. it was being in the mix...*

On the evening of April 8<sup>th</sup>, after meeting briefly with Henry Kissinger and Ford's chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld, and then having dinner with Senator Jacob Javits, Max checked into the Madison Hotel.

There he met with his good friend, Leonard Garment, former Special Counsel to President Nixon and current US Representative to the UN Human Rights Commission. Garment had agreed to help Max get ready for the White House meeting.

Max had prepared extensive notes for the meeting but was interested in Garment's input. Leonard Garment was a Wall Street lawyer with a well-deserved reputation for eloquence.

Max knew how important it was to be well prepared. He had to persuade both Ford and Kissinger to continue the United States' support of Israel despite the recent setbacks.

**BOB MCCABE:**

*Look! Max works to get what he wants done! And you've got to be strong willed to do that. And you've got to know the limitations of what you can do, and what you need others to help you to do. And that's a key again, to why he's been so successful. He knows the buttons to push. He knows who can help. He knows who can be motivated, whether it's political, business or social. Um.. he's built this tremendous reservoir of contacts and working with people. He's got the experience to do it, and he's passing it on to others.*

Max had a very informal and friendly relationship with President Ford and met regularly with the President and Henry Kissinger.

But he knew that his message regarding the President's reassessment could not be taken lightly. Leonard Garment suggested that Max read a written statement to the President rather than talking more informally as he typically would do.

This approach would lend a more formal tone and it might keep Kissinger from interrupting.

The friends worked on the speech until 3AM. The next morning, Garment took their written copy to the White House and had it typed for Max's meeting.

Max went to sleep that night knowing he was once again, well-prepared to help Israel through its latest crisis.

*ROBERT ARONSON:*

*Max has been absolutely indispensable to Israel's leaders.. every Prime Minister. From the time of going back to probably Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister. He's helped them understand how to deal with American Presidents. How to deal with things like the Senate. The Israelis.. the Israeli leaders have a very different kind of mentality.. different culture on how they deal people. Max has been able to help them understand how to approach Washington. And for that matter, how to approach and deal with the American Jewish community. So he has, really gone beyond simply the political realm. Also to the, what I call the relationship building realm um.. with American Jewry. He's devoted his life to the security of the state of Israel. The success of the state of Israel, in ways that very-very few people have.*

Max arrived at the White House and reviewed his typed speech, making notes to himself on most of the pages. Max knew the stakes were high because President Ford was giving a "State of the World" address to Congress the next evening. It was critical that he persuade the President to soften his stance toward the Israelis and communicate that in his upcoming speech.

Max was welcomed into the Oval Office by his old friend. But he knew he had a demanding task ahead of him. Both Ford and Kissinger felt they had been placed in a difficult position by the Israeli leaders.

They were likely to be defensive and not willing to budge on the reassessment plans. But Max was confident he could persuade them to understand his point of view.

*ROBERT ARONSON:*

*He was effective because he's diplomatic. He works behind the scenes. He is a consensus builder. He never over reacts. He never loses it. At least not when it comes to something important like, foreign policy or bringing people together. He always keeps the objective in mind. He never lets the people or the problems get in the way of the objective.*

Max carefully read his statement to Ford and Kissinger. Leonard Garment's strategy paid off. Kissinger did not interrupt Max even though he took almost 35 minutes to read his entire statement. President Ford was visibly moved. He rose and put his arm on Max's shoulder saying, "Max, I want to thank you. I feel a lot better about things now."

*GERALD FORD:*

*I think, Max loved America and he had great support and affection for Israel and he wanted those terribly difficult problems in the Middle East solved if possible. And because he was a loyal American, he could speak forthrightly and he did about how the United States could bring the parties together – the Israelis and Palestinians. He was a real patriot.*

Kissinger was satisfied that the Israelis did not take America's support for granted.

He also heard that Rabin was sensitive to the possibility that ending talks with Kissinger so abruptly in March was embarrassing to the Secretary.

The normally combative Secretary of State left the meeting satisfied that the Israelis could be flexible as all parties worked toward peace.

The next day, April 10, 1975, President Ford addressed a joint session of Congress. Though he discussed the Israeli and Egyptian impasse, he never mentioned the "reassessment" of US policy toward Israel. His tone had softened significantly from the previous week.

And, if his carefully chosen words were not clear enough for Rabin and the Israelis, the President also sent a symbolic message. Seated in the gallery with Betty, Jack and Susan Ford, was a very pleased Max Fisher.

Max returned to the White House the next day and six more times during the spring and summer of 1975. He helped the President and his advisors focus on the important negotiations that ultimately led to the Sinai II Agreement. That historic treaty was signed in Geneva on September 4, 1975 by Israel and Egypt.