

Chapter 7

The Political Lessons Drawn from the AWACS Debate

AIPAC had set as its principal objective congressional passage of the resolution of disapproval [of the AWACS sale]; the failure to achieve this goal was a major defeat for the American Zionist movement . . . It was also a clear and unambiguous message to American Jewry that "victory is no longer automatic when it comes to maintaining U.S. support for Israel."

—David Howard Goldberg, National Executive Director,
Canadian Professors for Peace in the Middle East

Reagan's effort to successfully conclude the AWACS sale began with his decision to approve the deal on April 21, 1981, and ended with the Senate vote to reject the Packwood Resolution on October 28. During those six months, Reagan waged one of the toughest and most arduous battles in Congress ever undertaken by any president over a single controversial policy issue. In his memoirs, Reagan calls the AWACS debate "one of the toughest battles of my eight years in Washington. . . . With the exception of two or three votes on our tax and spending cut legislation, I spent more time in one-on-one meetings and on the telephone attempting to win on this measure than on any other."

Reagan correctly attributed the bitter and acrimonious nature of the AWACS debate to the intense and vociferous opposition mounted by the pro-Israel lobby: "Israel had very strong friends in Congress." The debate represents one of the most critical and controversial events in the history of American diplomacy and legislative politics, which locked the Reagan administration and opponents of the AWACS sale in a fierce and pitched battle over American policy in the most economically and strategically vital region in the world—the Middle East. Accordingly, there are at least five political lessons to be drawn from the debate.

THE LIMITED POWER OF THE PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY

The first lesson to be drawn from the AWACS debate is that, contrary to the arguments of its critics, the pro-Israel lobby does not control American policy in the Middle East. If the pro-Israel lobby did so, then the AWACS sale would indeed have been defeated in Congress. However, no nation is more economically and strategically vital to the United States than Saudi Arabia; and the Reagan administration had a strong interest in successfully concluding the sale as an essential ingredient in the development of a credible and effective air defense system, which would protect the vital oilfields of the Gulf from hostile air attack. The administration hoped that Saudi Arabia would reciprocate for America's willingness to assume a dominant role in restoring security to the Persian Gulf by continuing its pursuit of an oil policy favorable to the economic interests of the industrial world, and abandoning its opposition to the Camp David peace process in favor of the American effort to achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. Given the clear and irrefutable case for the AWACS sale, the deal should have easily sailed through Congress, with little, if any, opposition. The fact that the sale provoked so much opposition in Congress is ample evidence that the pro-Israel lobby wields enormous political clout on Capitol Hill.

In delineating the political power of the pro-Israel lobby on Capitol Hill one must distinguish between the House and the Senate. Consistent with the arguments of its critics, the pro-Israel lobby does indeed control American policy in the Middle East in the House. As we saw in Chapter 1, a majority of House members had lined up behind the Long-Lent Resolution, by July 1, 1981—fully three months before Reagan notified Congress of his intent to approve the deal.

The fact that the House did not even give Reagan the courtesy of making his case for the sale—and ultimately passed the Long-Lent Resolution by an overwhelming margin of nearly three to one—is sufficient evidence that the pro-Israel lobby controls American Middle East policy in the House. By passing the resolution, the House completely ignored the catastrophic consequences for the vital national security interests of the United States, and American economic, strategic, and diplomatic leadership in the international community, which would result from the defeat of the sale in Congress. Since the House was unwilling to grant serious consideration for the sale, let alone approve the deal, Reagan wisely decided to ignore the House early in the AWACS debate and focus his efforts to obtain approval for the agreement in the Senate.

Unlike the House, the Senate was willing to grant serious consideration to the sale and allow Reagan to plead his case for the deal before its members. However, the Senate approved the sale by only a narrow margin of three votes, demonstrating that while the pro-Israel lobby does not control American Middle East policy in the Senate, organized Jewry still exercised enormous influence on this issue in the Senate. Indeed, Reagan's efforts to win Senate approval for the sale proved to be an exceedingly difficult, arduous, and seemingly insur-

mountable task—sufficient proof that the pro-Israel lobby exercises enormous political clout in the Senate, though still substantially less so than in the House.

Why did the pro-Israel lobby prove to have so much more influence in the House than in the Senate? As we saw in Chapter 2, the answer lies in the fact that House members represent relatively small constituencies. This provides politically powerful interest groups like organized Jewry the ability to mobilize their substantial financial and organizational resources to defeat those House members perceived to be hostile to the interests of their members. The Jewish community's success in mobilizing its resources to defeat Paul Findley, the foremost critic of Israel in Congress during the 1970s and early 1980s, is illustrative of this. In order to avoid being targeted for defeat by organized Jewry, House members have generally served as strong and unswerving allies of Israel; and it is easy to see why the AWACS sale did not receive serious consideration, let alone approval, in the House.

In contrast to House members, senators generally represent large constituencies. Interest groups generally lack the financial and organizational resources to defeat a Senator hostile to the interests of their members. This is true, given the generally large number of individuals who vote in each state. Accordingly, senators have greater flexibility to consider issues on their merit and not defer to the wishes of interest groups.

To be sure, politically powerful interest groups could use their substantial resources to defeat a senator perceived to be hostile to the interests of their members. However, this can only occur in states where those interest groups can mobilize a sizable constituency to vote to oust the senator in question. A good example of this is the Jewish community's success in mobilizing its substantial financial and organizational resources to defeat Charles H. Percy, one of the leading critics of Israel in the Senate during the 1970s and 1980s. However, organized Jewry's successful campaign against Percy was based on the existence of a large Jewish community in Illinois, who voted against Percy by the overwhelming margin of nearly two to one. Absent the existence of a large Jewish community in Illinois, Percy would almost certainly have won his reelection campaign in 1984.

There are only four states—New York, California, Florida, and Illinois—where the Jewish community is sufficiently large to make a real difference in a Senate election. This means that the eight senators representing those states must support the interests of Israel on every major issue before Congress if they wish to be reelected. Indeed, in the case of the AWACS sale, only two of those eight senators—Charles H. Percy of Illinois and S.I. Hayakawa of California—voted to approve the deal; neither senator was reelected after the conclusion of the AWACS debate.

In addition to the defeat of Percy in 1984, Hayakawa abandoned his plan to seek reelection in 1982. Had Hayakawa sought reelection, he would have undoubtedly faced great difficulty in the 1982 Senate campaign in California as a result of his support for the AWACS sale; and this is unquestionably a major

reason why he chose not to run. The remaining ninety-two senators representing the forty-six states with relatively small Jewish constituencies are relatively free to defy the wishes of the pro-Israel lobby and cast votes antithetical to the interests of Israel with little or no fear that they may be successfully targeted for defeat by organized Jewry the next time they run for reelection. Since practically the entire Senate was free to defy the will of the pro-Israel lobby, Reagan succeeded, albeit with great difficulty, in persuading a majority of its members to approve the AWACS sale.

If the pro-Israel lobby controls the House and, exercises limited, though hardly insubstantial, influence in the Senate, it has practically no political clout in the White House. Presidents generally make foreign policy decisions based on what they perceive to be the national security interests of the United States. This leaves interest groups little, if any, opportunity to influence presidential decision making on foreign policy.

Indeed, Reagan completely ignored the enormous pressure the pro-Israel lobby exerted on the White House in its attempt to persuade the president to reverse his decision to approve the AWACS sale. Such pressure had no impact whatsoever in the six-month-long, unrelenting battle Reagan doggedly waged in Congress in his effort to obtain its approval of the sale. Reagan completely ignored this precisely because he was convinced that the deal was in the vital national security interests of the United States. Reagan was unwilling to even consider sacrificing the national security interests (which dictated that he approve the sale) in order to satisfy the political demands of the pro-Israel lobby that he abandon his support for the deal.

To be sure, Reagan had a strong political interest in developing close ties to the pro-Israel lobby, since the Jewish community represented an important constituency. It was in Reagan's own political interest not to proceed with the AWACS sale, since the deal threatened to turn the Jewish community against him. However, Reagan recognized that, as president, he had to place the national security interests of the United States above his own political interests; and it is this political calculation which led Reagan to ignore the sustained pressure the pro-Israel lobby exerted on the White House, and pursue his effort to successfully conclude the deal in the face of intense and vociferous opposition from organized Jewry and its allies in Congress.

THE SENATE DEFERS TO THE PRESIDENT ON MATTERS OF FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL SECURITY

A second lesson to be learned from the AWACS debate is that the Senate will tend to defer to the authority of the president on matters of foreign policy and national security, even when his policies confront intense opposition from a politically powerful and well-organized interest group. This was certainly the case in the AWACS debate. During October 1981, the Reagan administration made an effective and irrefutable case that the AWACS sale was in the vital

national security interests of the United States. The administration's case was buttressed by the fact that sixteen prominent foreign and national security policy officials agreed to issue a statement on October 5 declaring the sale to be a matter of vital national security.

The Reagan administration also benefited from the strong support the AWACS sale received from perhaps the most successful foreign policy leader and expert ever to reside in the White House—Richard Nixon. The fact that the administration considered the sale to be a matter of vital national security was to be expected; but the fact that the administration's view was shared by Nixon and sixteen other former foreign and national policy officials (stretching back to the Eisenhower presidency), all of whom were independent of the Reagan White House, could not be ignored. The Senate had no choice but to consider the sale as a national security issue, given this fact.

Reagan's success in making the AWACS sale a matter of national security rather than domestic politics guaranteed Senate approval of the deal. Senate rejection of the sale would have made it appear that senators were placing their own political interests—specifically the need to satisfy the demands of the pro-Israel lobby, above the national security interests of the United States. This would have resulted in the loss of political credibility for the Senate as a whole, as well as its individual members.

To avoid the appearance that they were playing politics with the AWACS issue, a majority of the Senate, albeit a slim one, decided they had no alternative but to approve the sale. This was necessary to demonstrate that the Senate was a responsible institution whose individual members were fully capable of placing the national security interests of the United States above their own domestic political interests. By defying the will of the pro-Israel lobby and voting to approve the deal, the Senate did much to maintain its political credibility as a responsible institution capable of appropriately deciding matters of national security, even on issues as politically charged as the AWACS deal. The Senate vote to approve the sale was certainly one of the finest hours in the history of that institution.

THE "PASSIVE" NATURE OF THE REAGAN PRESIDENCY

Perhaps the most enduring image of the Reagan presidency is that Ronald Reagan was a passive Chief Executive. Reagan's foremost biographer, Lou Cannon, devotes an entire chapter of his informative and authoritative book on the Reagan presidency to the "passive" nature of Ronald Reagan's style of decision making. Indeed, the chapter is appropriately entitled "Passive President."³

However, this examination of the AWACS debate finds Reagan to be anything but a passive president. Indeed, it is doubtful that scholars can find substantial evidence of any president who devoted so much sheer energy and focused attention on a single issue as Reagan did in the case of the AWACS debate. To be sure, this is the third book this author has produced on the Reagan presidency.

The two previous books—focusing on the issues of civil rights and immigration—found Reagan to be every bit the passive president his image suggests; but this was far from the case with the AWACS debate, where Reagan devoted an unusual degree of energy and attention to pursuing his dogged and relentless six-month-long battle to win congressional approval of the AWACS sale.⁴ Cannon's book, and the three books this author has produced on the Reagan presidency, suggest that while Ronald Reagan was a passive president overall, this was not the case on matters involving the economy and national security. In contrast to his generally passive style in managing most issues he confronted as president, Reagan displayed an unusual degree of energy, interest, and activism on issues involving the economy and national security.

Why did Reagan display such an unusual level of interest and attention on matters of the economy and national security? The answer is that Reagan was elected to the presidency on a pledge to reverse the precipitous economic and military decline the United States had suffered during the 1970s. Absent this decline, Reagan would have had much greater difficulty winning the 1980 election against an incumbent president—Jimmy Carter.

The 1980 presidential election was less an affirmation of public support for Reagan than a rejection of Carter's leadership. After four years of malaise under Carter, characterized by double-digit inflation and interest rates, long gasoline lines, and one of the greatest military fiascos in American history—the failed Iran hostage rescue mission of 1980—the public wanted a president who could restore America's sense of economic and military self-confidence. To the public, Reagan seemed to be the perfect figure to achieve this goal, and he had no trouble defeating the hapless President Carter in 1980.⁵

Since reversing the American economic and military decline during the 1970s was so vital to the credibility of his presidency, Reagan had to take a strong interest in all major issues involving the economy and national security. Nothing was of greater economic and strategic importance to the United States than the need to restore security to the politically unstable, but economically vital, Persian Gulf. From 1979 to 1980, the Persian Gulf was rocked by a series of four destabilizing events—the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, the Iran hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. Those events placed the industrial world's access to the vast and vital oil reserves of the Persian Gulf in grave jeopardy.

Indeed, it was the political instability of the Persian Gulf during 1979–1980 and the energy crisis linked to the political turmoil in the region transpiring in those two years which resulted in the high inflation and interest rates, long gasoline lines, and military setbacks the United States suffered during the ill-fated Carter presidency. Reagan's pledge to reverse these conditions could never have been achieved unless the new president took action to restore security to the politically troubled and oil-rich Persian Gulf. Essential to achieving this goal was the development of a credible and effective air defense system, which could protect the vital oilfields of the Gulf from air attack from anyone of three po-

tential sources of hostility—Iraq, Iran, or Soviet military forces in Afghanistan. An essential ingredient in the development of such an air defense system was the sale of the AWACS to America's foremost ally in the Persian Gulf—Saudi Arabia.

The AWACS sale was essential to enable the United States to use its vast military power to protect the oilfields of the Gulf from hostile air attack and to elicit Saudi Arabia's continued pursuit of an oil policy favorable to the economic interests of the industrial world and abandonment of its opposition to the Camp David peace process in favor of support for the American effort to achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. Those goals could not have been achieved unless the United States granted Saudi Arabia's request for the purchase of the AWACS. Indeed, failure of the United States to grant this request would have compelled Saudi Arabia to turn to Britain as an alternative source of airborne surveillance technology. This would have disrupted the ability of the United States and Saudi Arabia to develop the military cooperation necessary to preserve the security of the Persian Gulf, thereby preventing Washington from playing a dominant role in the defense of the region.

Without the protective umbrella of the vast military power of the United States, the oilfields of the Gulf would have become vulnerable to air attack. Should such an attack have occurred, it would have resulted in a prolonged interruption in oil exports from the Persian Gulf, and the entire industrial world would have faced economic collapse. The United States could not have been taken seriously as a global superpower unless Washington retained the capability to protect the oilfields of the Gulf from hostile air attack, precisely because possession of this capability was critical to guaranteeing the economic survival of the industrial world.

Saudi Arabia would have retaliated against any congressional action to block the AWACS sale by ceasing to pursue an oil policy favorable to economic interests of the United States. Given the dominant role Saudi Arabia plays in the international oil market, such a development would have had catastrophic consequences for the American economy. In addition, a defeat of the sale in Congress would have dealt a devastating blow to the Reagan administration's efforts to use the deal as a means to induce Saudi Arabia to abandon its opposition to the Camp David peace process in favor of the American effort to achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. With the United States unable to play the dominant role in preserving the security of the Persian Gulf, and Saudi Arabia pursuing an oil policy contrary to the economic interests of this nation while continuing its opposition to the Camp David peace process, American economic, strategic, and diplomatic leadership in the international community would have been gravely undermined, if not destroyed.

Indeed, American economic and strategic leadership in the international community rests on Washington's capability to use its vast military power to preserve the security of the Persian Gulf and to elicit Saudi Arabia's continued pursuit of an oil policy favorable to the economic interests of the industrial

world. Consummation of the AWACS sale was essential to the achievement of those two goals.

In addition to preserving American economic and strategic leadership in the international community, the AWACS sale was critical to Washington's ability to maintain its diplomatic leadership around the world. Such diplomatic leadership largely rested on America's ability to achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. Such a settlement was essential to restoring stability to the politically troubled Middle East, which remains the most economically and strategically vital region in the world. The achievement of such a settlement required Saudi support. As by far the wealthiest nation in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia had enormous political clout, which could be used to encourage Israel's Arab neighbors to negotiate a comprehensive peace settlement with Israel.

The AWACS sale represented an American gesture of friendship and support for Saudi Arabia. The Reagan administration hoped that Saudi Arabia would reciprocate for this gesture by abandoning its opposition to the Camp David peace process in favor of the American effort to achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. However, this could not be achieved if Congress blocked the sale. By representing a slap against Saudi Arabia, such congressional action would only have encouraged Riyadh to continue its opposition to the Camp David peace process, thereby dealing a severe, and perhaps fatal, blow to the American efforts in the Middle East.

In the final analysis, American economic, strategic, and diplomatic leadership in the international community rested on the continuation of close Saudi-American cooperation in preserving the mutual interests of both nations, and such cooperation could not be achieved unless the United States granted Riyadh's request for the purchase of the AWACS. By sustaining and enhancing the close relationship existing between the United States and Saudi Arabia, the AWACS sale made an indispensable contribution to preserving, and indeed strengthening, American economic, strategic, and diplomatic leadership in the international community.

With the exception of the Persian Gulf War of 1991, no issue the United States had confronted since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 was of greater importance to American economic and strategic leadership in the international community than the AWACS debate. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that Reagan, normally a passive president, would wage one of the most relentless, all-out, and non-stop lobbying efforts in Congress ever undertaken by any president to win Senate approval for the AWACS sale. This is especially true given the fact that the credibility of the Reagan presidency rested so much on his ability to restore American economic and strategic leadership in the international community.

Congressional action to block the sale would have prevented Reagan from fulfilling his campaign promise to reverse the precipitous economic and military

decline the United States suffered during the 1970s; and the credibility of the Reagan presidency would have been severely damaged, if not destroyed.

No issue Reagan ever confronted was more important to him, both as politician and president, than approval of the AWACS sale, and this is precisely why he utilized every ounce of his considerable political skills and leadership talent to win approval for the deal from a skeptical Senate. By achieving victory in his battle to successfully conclude the sale, Reagan demonstrated not only his mastery of the art of politics, but he proved himself to be every bit the leader he promised when he was elected to the presidency. By making an enormous contribution to Reagan's success in restoring American economic and strategic leadership to the international community, the sale enabled the president to perform the central task the voters sent him to Washington to do: end the malaise of the Carter years, and restore America's self-confidence and sense of purpose as a great power. Reagan may very well have been a passive president, but when it came to issues involving the economy and national security, scholars would be hard-pressed to find a president who was more actively committed to assuring continued American economic and strategic leadership in the international community. Rather than "passive," the AWACS debate suggests a more complicated view of the Reagan presidency: while remaining a passive president overall, Reagan was among the most activist of Chief Executives on issues involving the economy and national security.

RONALD REAGAN: A GREAT PRESIDENT?

A fourth political lesson of the AWACS debate concerns the academic community's efforts to evaluate the Reagan presidency. While historians generally rank Reagan as a below-average president, Reagan's own academic admirers rate him as a great Chief Executive.⁶ This book, limited as it is to the AWACS debate, can come to no definitive conclusion in resolving this dispute concerning where Reagan belongs in the ranking of America's forty-two presidents. Nevertheless, the AWACS debate suggests that claims concerning Reagan's alleged greatness cannot be lightly dismissed.

The AWACS case suggests that Reagan displayed attributes of presidential greatness for two reasons. First, Reagan demonstrated the political skills and powers of persuasion required to convince a skeptical Senate to approve the AWACS sale. This was no small feat, given the enormous opposition existing in the Senate, to say nothing of the House, to the sale. It is difficult to conceive many other presidents who could have possessed the requisite political skills to perform the seemingly impossible task of mustering a majority in the Senate to approve the sale.

Second, Reagan made a major contribution to the vital economic and national security interests of the United States through his success in obtaining Senate approval of the AWACS sale. Congressional action to block the sale would have had catastrophic consequences for the vital economic and national security

interests of the United States for the reasons explained earlier. The strong economy and enhanced national security the United States enjoyed during the 1980s is due in no small part to Reagan's successful conclusion of the sale, and the strengthened cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia which resulted from the deal. By engaging Saudi Arabia in the military cooperation with the United States necessary to preserve the security of the politically unstable Persian Gulf, and Riyadh's continued pursuit of an oil policy favorable to the economic interests of the industrial world, the sale played a major role in Reagan's success in restoring American economic and strategic leadership in the international community. Given the enormous contribution, the sale made to the vital economic and national security interests of the United States, Reagan's superb and masterful handling of this politically explosive issue provides evidence that he displayed attributes of presidential greatness, though much further study of the other major foreign and domestic policy issues Reagan confronted during his tenure in office will be required before any definitive judgment can be rendered concerning where he stands in the ranking of America's forty-two presidents.

BALANCING AMERICA'S COMPETING INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Perhaps the fifth, final, and most enduring political lesson from the AWACS debate is that the United States does not need to sacrifice its special relationship with Israel in order to forge stronger ties with Saudi Arabia. A major fallacy of opponents' arguments against the AWACS sale was that the deal would undermine America's strong and unswerving commitment to preserve the security and survival of Israel. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The sale in no way resulted in any diminishing of Reagan's staunch and unequivocal support for Israel. Indeed, Reagan is perhaps the most pro-Israel president ever to have served in the White House thus far; and he fully recognized that the sale was not incompatible with his support for the Jewish state.

Opponents of the AWACS sale assumed that the deal would undermine America's commitment to preserve the security and survival of Israel, given Saudi Arabia's unrelenting hostility against the Jewish state. However, opponents ignored the fact that, despite the deep and seemingly irreconcilable divisions between Israel and Saudi Arabia over the Arab-Israeli conflict, the two nations remain united in their support for political moderation in the Middle East, a region which has served as the source of so much political extremism. Indeed, both Israel and Saudi Arabia have been the victims, and continue to confront the threat of terrorism from various state-sponsored extremist groups in the Arab and Islamic world bent on the destruction of both the Jewish state and the House of Saud. In addition, Saudi Arabia confronts the continued threat to its security emanating from its two radical neighbors in the Persian Gulf—Iraq and Iran. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are moderate nations, which have opposed the

political extremism emanating from various sources in the Middle East—whether Iraq, Iran, or the Palestinians. This has driven both nations to seek a strong alliance with the United States.

The challenge for the United States is to balance its competing interests in the Middle East—to maintain its commitment to preserve the security and survival of Israel while continuing to cooperate with Saudi Arabia in guaranteeing the mutual economic and strategic interests of Washington and Riyadh. The United States must engage Saudi Arabia in the necessary cooperation in order to enable Washington to use its vast military power to preserve the security of the politically unstable Persian Gulf and elicit Riyadh's continued pursuit of an oil policy favorable to the economic interests of the industrial world. In addition, the United States needs Saudi Arabia to use the enormous political clout Riyadh wields in the Middle East, through its vast oil wealth, to support and contribute to the success of the American effort to achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the region. Given both Israeli and Saudi support for American economic, strategic, and diplomatic leadership in the international community, the United States need not pursue a relationship with one nation which sacrifices its ties with the other. Rather, the United States can pursue close relations with both Israel and Saudi Arabia in preserving the vital interests Washington maintains in the two nations of the region, despite the enmity existing between them.

Strong Saudi-American relations are not incompatible with close Israeli-American relations, and vice versa. Rather, American retention of strong relations with both Israel and Saudi Arabia represents an essential ingredient in Washington's pursuit of a credible and effective policy in the Middle East, which balances this nation's two competing, but compatible, interests in the region: continuing America's strong commitment to preserve the security and survival of Israel; and engaging Saudi Arabia in the economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation required to guarantee the industrial world's access to the vast oil reserves of the Gulf and achieve a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. Through his approval of the AWACS sale, and his reassurances of continued American support for Israel, Reagan demonstrated his recognition of those competing interests and his ability to balance them. That is the great contribution Reagan made to American policy in the Middle East; and the president's skillful balancing of America's competing interests in the region was the essential factor which enabled him to fulfill his campaign pledge to restore American economic and strategic leadership to the international community. Reagan's brilliant handling of the AWACS issue, and the enormous economic and strategic benefits the United States gained from the AWACS sale, is one major reason why claims by Reagan's academic admirers that he ranks among America's greatest presidents cannot be easily dismissed or ignored.