

AWACS to Saudi Arabia (1981)

“It is too late for the ‘if onlys.’ We have to say yes or no to a choice none of us looks forward to.”

Sen. William S. Cohen, R-ME

What was the 1981 AWACS sale, and why was it so significant?

The 1981 package to **Saudi Arabia**—valued at roughly **\$8.5 billion**—was then the largest U.S. foreign arms sale, centered on five **E-3 Sentry AWACS** aircraft, eight **KE-3** tankers, and upgrades for Saudi **F-15s**. Because AWACS fuse long-range radar with battle management, the deal dramatically expanded Riyadh’s surveillance and command reach. It also reversed earlier U.S. caution about providing advanced systems to the kingdom, raising fears of eroding Israel’s edge. To the **Reagan** administration, however, bolstering Saudi air warning and control capacity was a strategic investment in Gulf stability and oil security at a volatile Cold War moment.

What geopolitical context drove President Reagan’s approval?

After **1979**, the strategic map changed: the **Iranian Revolution** toppled a U.S. pillar; the **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan** exposed a southern flank; the **Iran–Iraq War** threatened energy flows. Washington judged the Gulf a cockpit of great-power competition where protecting oil and deterring Moscow required stronger regional partners. The administration argued that reinforcing a pro-Western **Saudi Arabia** would harden defenses from the **Persian Gulf to North Africa**, reassure nervous Arab moderates, and reduce incentives for Soviet clients. In this framing, AWACS were less a favor to Riyadh than a sensor and command net anchoring U.S. strategy.

Why did opponents argue the sale endangered Israel?

Critics warned Saudi-operated AWACS could track **Israeli Air Force** movements deep into their airspace, blunting Israel’s doctrine of preemption and compromising operational surprise. They feared the transfer would erode Israel’s **qualitative military edge**, spark a costly regional arms spiral, and trigger compensatory Israeli demands that Washington would be hard-pressed to refuse. Skeptics also questioned Saudi reliability, noting non-recognition of Israel, the **1973 oil embargo**, internal succession uncertainties, and the risk that sensitive technology might leak if the monarchy were destabilized. To them, the benefits to U.S. Gulf strategy were speculative; the dangers to Israel’s security were immediate and concrete.

What was President Reagan’s core rationale for pushing the sale?

Reagan framed the vote as a test of U.S. leadership and credibility. He argued **Saudi Arabia** was pivotal to defending oil infrastructure and sea-lanes, containing Soviet reach, and stiffening the moderate Arab camp. Backing away under pressure, he warned, would rattle other partners and embolden adversaries who doubted American resolve. He also contended that integrating the kingdom more tightly with U.S. systems would anchor Riyadh to Washington and, paradoxically,

support Arab–Israeli diplomacy by empowering a key “moderate” actor. In short, the sale was presented as necessary Cold War statecraft, not a concession that sacrificed Israel’s security.

What safeguards and compensations were used to blunt opposition?

The administration coupled the sale with **sweeteners** for Israel and binding **safeguards** on Saudi operations. **Secretary Alexander Haig** promised additional **F-15s**, financing, and steps that soon evolved into U.S.–Israel **strategic cooperation**. To secure Senate votes, **Reagan** issued an October 28 letter detailing unprecedented conditions: rigorous U.S. technology-security controls, continuous American access to AWACS data, bans on third-party exposure, defensive and geographic operating limits, and a joint command-and-control architecture giving U.S. advisors a decisive say. He further pledged to certify that the transfer would directly enhance regional stability and prospects for peace before any aircraft moved.

How did the lobbying battle unfold in Washington?

The fight became a classic executive–legislative showdown. **AIPAC** and allied groups mobilized early, assembling majority opposition letters in both chambers and staging a nationwide campaign to block the deal. The **White House** concentrated on the **Senate**, where a narrow path existed, and **Reagan** personally lobbied wavering members, casting the vote as a measure of American reliability. He leaned on heavyweight validators—most notably **Henry Kissinger**, who called approval essential for Middle East diplomacy—and rebuked foreign interference with the line, “It is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy.” The margin would be razor-thin.

What was the result of the final vote, and what followed immediately?

On **October 28, 1981**, the Senate narrowly defeated a resolution of disapproval, **52–48**, allowing the sale to stand; under the **Arms Export Control Act**, both chambers had to block it for rejection. **Reagan** proclaimed a strategic victory that reaffirmed U.S. commitments and preserved presidential latitude in arms policy. Implementation, however, did not proceed at once. The administration had privately promised that no AWACS would transfer until the detailed conditions were fully in place, and it began the painstaking work of codifying security procedures, basing arrangements, training pipelines, and oversight mechanisms acceptable to skeptical senators.

When were the AWACS delivered, and did dire predictions come true?

Delivery lagged until **1986**, after Congress embedded the conditions in law and **Reagan** certified compliance, citing Saudi steps that supported regional stability. The aircraft soon performed defensive surveillance over the **Persian Gulf**, including during the latter stages of the **Iran–Iraq War**, coordinating air warning without incident. Contrary to forecasts, the planes were **not** used against **Israel**, sensitive software and tactics remained protected under stringent U.S. controls, and Israel’s military edge endured—bolstered by deepening strategic cooperation with Washington. By the late 1980s, the episode looked less like a turning point against Israel than a hard-fought, safeguarded accommodation to Cold War realities.

Timeline

- **1973:** Arab oil embargo reshapes U.S. Gulf strategy.
- **1978–1980:** Carter’s **F-15 sale** to Saudi Arabia approved only with **no bomb racks/long-range tanks**; **1980 AIPAC-led Hill opposition** stymies any new Saudi package.
- **Early–March 1981:** Reagan moves to add **AWACS + F-15 enhancements**; State cites **Afghanistan, Iran’s revolution, Iran–Iraq War, Soviet reach**.
- **April 2, 1981:** NSC backs an **\$8.5B package** (5 AWACS + upgrades); **Haig** overruled; later in **April** he offers Israel “**sweeteners**” (extra F-15s, loans, Kfir exports).
- **May 1981:** Poll shows only **19%** support for the AWACS sale.
- **June 1981:** Israel strikes **Osirak**; supporters argue Saudi early warning is vital; **Begin** denounces sale, angering Reagan.
- **Late June–July 1981:** **54 Senators** and **224 House members** urge Reagan **not** to send the proposal.
- **Summer 1981:** Washington and Riyadh negotiate **unprecedented safeguards/conditions** “beyond standard terms.”
- **September 1981:** AIPAC convenes a **National Emergency Convention**; Reagan begins intensive senator outreach.
- **September–October 1981:** White House **full-court press** to flip Senate votes; **Kissinger** publicly backs approval as “essential.”
- **October 1, 1981:** Formal **notification to Congress** starts the **30-day clock**.
- **October 28, 1981:** Reagan sends **assurances** (six binding conditions: U.S. oversight, data-sharing, **defensive use in Saudi airspace**, etc.).
- **October 28, 1981:** **Senate disapproval fails, 52–48** → sale survives (House opposition moot under AECA).
- **November 1981–1982:** U.S.–Israel **strategic cooperation** begins; **Fahd/Fez plan** floated as Saudi moderation.
- **1982–1987:** Security terms finalized; **1985** Congress codifies delivery conditions (**Section 131**); **mid-1986** Reagan certifies; **June 1986** deliveries begin; **1987** AWACS fully operational over the **Persian Gulf**.

Ronald Reagan
An American Life

My introduction to the high emotions that surround almost everything to do with the Middle East occurred during my first few weeks in Washington.¹ During its final months, the Carter administration had made a tentative decision—but had not yet announced it—to sell Saudi Arabia several AWACS aircraft—flying radar stations that can spot incoming aircraft and missiles and direct the launching of defensive or offensive missiles.² Even before inauguration day, Jewish organizations in America began pressing me to cancel the sale.³ When I got to the White House, I ordered a complete review of the proposed sale and decided to go ahead with it because I was told the planes would not materially change the balance of power in the Arab–Israeli conflict.⁴ I thought the Arab world would regard it as a gesture of evenhandedness in the Middle East.⁵

Even though Saudi Arabia had opposed the Camp David accords, I thought it was important to strengthen ties with this relatively moderate Arab country—not only because its oil exports were essential to our economy, but because, like Israel, it wanted to resist Soviet expansionism in the region.⁶ In some ways, our interests in the Middle East and those of Saudi Arabia coincided. Its oilfields were among the richest in the world, coveted by the Soviet Union and by neighboring Iran, but protected by a relatively small Saudi military.⁷

The Saudis needed the friendship and, if necessary, the help of a great power in defending their oilfields. We wanted to keep the Soviets out of the region as well as prevent the radical, anti-American Iranian revolution from spreading to Saudi Arabia, with all the implications that could have for our economy. To put it simply, I didn't want Saudi Arabia to become another Iran. Therefore, although I knew we'd never abandon our pledge to ensure Israel's survival, I believed we ought to pursue a course that convinced the moderate Arabs that we could play fair and that the United States was a credible ally.⁸

Following the previous administration's decision to "look on" while the Shah of Iran was removed from power, I also wanted to send a signal to our allies and to Moscow that the United States supported its friends and intended to exert influence in the Middle East not limited to our support of Israel.⁹ Moreover, I thought that strengthening ties to moderate Arab nations might help us in the long run to resolve some of the great problems of the Middle East. If we were ever going to bring the warring parties together and negotiate a peace, we had to convince the Arabs that we could be fair. In 1981, the projected sale became a symbol to moderate Arab countries of our fairness and the strength of our commitment to them. Unfortunately, to Israel and some of its supporters in Congress, the great battle became—for reasons with no foundation in reality, in my view—the symbol of what they perceived as a betrayal of Israel by the United States.¹⁰

They chose to take on the administration over the AWACS sale and created a donnybrook in

Congress that I believed we could not afford to lose. I believed it was a battle that had to be won to advance the cause of peace in the Middle East. I also knew that if we lost on AWACS it might undermine our ability to persuade Congress to approve our domestic programs and the rearmament of the Pentagon.¹¹

The battle began to heat up just a few days after I moved into the White House, when I started getting calls and visits from leaders of American Jewish organizations and their supporters in Congress, voicing opposition to the projected sale. By the middle of April, while I was recuperating from the shooting at the Hilton, I was receiving so much flak on the AWACS issue that it was taking up almost as much time as the economic recovery program.¹² One night during April I wrote in my diary:

I'm disturbed by the reaction and the opposition of so many groups (to my support of the AWACS sale). First of all it must be plain to them, they've never had a better friend of Israel in the W.H. than they have now. We are striving to bring stability to the Middle East and reduce the threat of a Soviet move in that direction. The basis for such stability must be peace between Israel and the Arab nations. The Saudis are a key to this. If they can follow the course of Egypt the rest might fall in place. The AWACS won't be theirs until 1985. In the meantime, much can be accomplished toward furthering the Camp David format.

We have assured the Israelis we will do whatever is needed to see that any help to the Arab states does not change the balance of power between them and the Arabs....

In Congress, the controversy simmered all summer before coming to a boil in early fall. Under the Arms Export Control Act (AECA), a major sale can be blocked by a joint disapproval—a majority in both houses. Israel's supporters already had the votes in the House. The principal battleground would be the Senate, where our party had a slim majority but Israel also had many friends.¹³

Prime Minister Menachem Begin arrived in Washington in early September, not long after Congress had passed the tax cuts pivotal to our recovery program, and suddenly no legislative issue occupied Washington more than the proposed sale. After a formal arrival ceremony on the South Lawn, Begin and I adjourned to the Oval Office for a get-acquainted chat. I told him I wanted the two of us to be on a first-name basis. Later, we met with our advisors in the Cabinet Room and Begin, as I expected, urged us not to go ahead with sale of the airplanes. At Camp David, he said, Israel had gone more than halfway to meet the Arabs on the road to peace.... Now, Begin argued, Israel was owed everything the United States could possibly do to preserve its security. I understood his concerns. Israel was a small country virtually surrounded by enemies...

Begin told me he was fearful of anything that might change the balance of power in the Middle East. But I told him our military people were convinced that the AWACS would not materially

alter the balance. I repeatedly emphasized that the United States was committed to ensuring Israel's survival and would do nothing to diminish its military superiority over the Arabs. I also tried to explain why we needed the participation of moderate Arab countries other than Egypt in efforts to achieve a lasting and secure peace in the Middle East. Writing that night in my diary about my meeting with Begin, I said:

I told him how strongly we felt it [the AWACS] could help bring the Saudis into the peace-making process. I assured him we (Israel and US) were allies; that the partnership benefited us as much as it did Israel and that we would not let a risk to Israel be created. While he didn't give up his objection, he mellowed. By the time the meetings and the state dinner ended, he said this was the warmest reception he'd ever had from a President of the United States. I think we're off to a good start in the difficult business of peace in the Middle East. My own feeling is that it should come through bilateral agreements just as it did with Egypt. That's why we want to start with Saudi Arabia.

Although I felt that our relationship had gotten off to a good start and that I had Begin's confidence that we would do whatever it took to ensure the safety of Israel, I learned that almost immediately after he left the White House, Begin went to Capitol Hill and began lobbying hard against me, the administration, and the AWACS—after he had told me he wouldn't do that.¹⁴

I didn't like having representatives of a foreign country—any foreign country—trying to interfere in what I regarded as our domestic political process and the setting of our foreign policy. I told the State Department to let Begin know that I didn't like it and that he was jeopardizing the close relationship of our countries unless he backed off. Privately, I felt he'd broken his word and I was angry about it. Late the following month, we won the battle when the Senate narrowly defeated the resolution that would have blocked the sale—52 to 48—and we achieved our goal of sending a signal to moderate Arabs that we could be evenhanded—even though Israel, in a message apparently dictated by Begin, denounced the administration for anti-Semitism and betrayal.¹⁵

During the preceding weeks, I had experienced one of the toughest battles of my eight years in Washington. Israel had very strong friends in Congress. 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. We had begun the month more than twenty votes behind in the Senate; we finally won by a margin of 52–48.¹⁶

That was just the first of many problems I'd have involving the Middle East.¹⁷

Notes

1. **Author & moment.** This is **President Ronald Reagan's** retrospective on the 1981 AWACS fight,

written in the first person. He took office **Jan 20, 1981**.

2. **AWACS defined. E-3A Sentry** airborne warning and control aircraft: long-range airborne radar/command platforms able to detect aircraft/missiles and direct friendly interceptors and SAMs. The proposed **Saudi package** also included related support and upgrades to Saudi **F-15s** (a major source of Israeli concern).
3. **Domestic opposition.** Organized primarily by **AIPAC** and a broad coalition of **pro-Israel groups**, joined by many members of Congress from both parties.
4. **Israeli “qualitative edge.”** U.S. assurances stressed that the sale would **not erode Israel’s qualitative military edge (QME)**; in practice this was expressed through **assurance letters**, follow-on Israeli capabilities, and U.S. commitments.
5. **“Evenhandedness.”** The administration sought to signal moderate Arabs, especially **Saudi Arabia**, that Washington was not **exclusively** aligned with Israel on arms issues, hoping to widen Arab participation in diplomacy.
6. **Context—Camp David & the Cold War.** Saudi Arabia **opposed** the separate **Egypt–Israel peace** (1979) but was central to U.S. strategy after the **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979)** and the **Iranian Revolution (1979)**; Reagan inherited the **Carter Doctrine** commitment to defend the Gulf.
7. **Saudi vulnerability.** The Kingdom had vast **oil reserves** and limited indigenous **force structure**; U.S. basing was minimal, so arms sales were a key tool for deterrence/assurance.
8. **Policy balance.** Reagan repeatedly affirmed an ironclad commitment to **Israel’s security** while pursuing **Arab ties**—a dual-track meant to enable broader **Arab–Israeli diplomacy**.
9. **Iran lesson & signaling.** The fall of the **Shah** and the **hostage crisis** loomed large; the administration wished to signal **support for allies** and **resolve** to Moscow and the region.
10. **Competing symbols.** To moderate Arabs, AWACS symbolized **U.S. reliability**; to many Israelis and their supporters, it was perceived—rightly or wrongly—as **erosion** of Israel’s unique status.
11. **Domestic stakes.** Reagan linked AWACS success to **broader political momentum**, including **economic program** passage and **defense buildup** credibility.
12. **Timeline—recovery & shooting.** Reagan survived an **assassination attempt** on **Mar 30, 1981** at the Washington Hilton; he was recuperating through April while AWACS lobbying intensified.
13. **AECA mechanics.** Under **Arms Export Control Act §36(b)**, Congress has **30 days** to pass a **joint resolution of disapproval**; in 1981, the **House** approved disapproval (**Oct 14, 1981**), but the **Senate** did **not**, so the sale proceeded.
14. **Begin’s lobbying.** PM **Menachem Begin** visited **Sept 9–15, 1981**; he publicly and privately opposed the sale and **lobbied on Capitol Hill**, prompting U.S. complaints about **foreign interference** in domestic legislative deliberations.
15. **Final Senate vote.** On **Oct 28, 1981**, the Senate **rejected** the disapproval resolution **52–48**,

allowing the sale to go forward. The administration coupled the win with new **assurances to Israel** and later signed a **U.S.–Israel Strategic Cooperation** memorandum (**Nov 30, 1981**) to steady bilateral ties.

16. **Whip effort.** The administration mounted an intensive bipartisan **lobbying campaign** (calls, meetings, classified briefings), flipping enough undecideds to overcome an initial projected deficit of **20+ votes**.
17. **Aftermath.** The AWACS fight foreshadowed later Middle East controversies in the 1980s (Lebanon, strategic cooperation with Israel, Arab arms sales), underscoring the **domestic political salience** of U.S. policy in the region.



President Ronald Reagan and Saudi King Fahd.

**Remarks of Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger
before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee
on the Air Defense Enhancement Package for Saudi Arabia**

September 28, 1981

I welcome this opportunity to present the Administration's case for selling AWACS aircraft and other air defense enhancements to Saudi Arabia.¹ The President's decision to sell this equipment to the Saudi government has stimulated deep emotions and intense debate, which have obscured the core issues. It is time that the real issues be put before Congress and the American people so they may be examined as dispassionately and fully as their importance requires.

The case for the sale of this air defense enhancement package to Saudi Arabia is simple: AWACS and the other air defense equipment will make significant, necessary contributions to the security interests of the United States and of our other friends and allies—including the NATO nations, Israel itself, Japan, and, of course, the countries of the Middle East, in whose volatile region the President's peace initiative is centered. This is a sale in our central, vital interests.²

As you are aware, the Saudi air defense enhancement package consists of: five AWACS (E-3A) aircraft; additional equipment for the air surveillance and control system; and associated ground-based control and communications equipment to provide a complete air-defense surveillance and control network; conformal fuel tanks to extend the range and mission endurance of Saudi Arabia's F-15 fighter aircraft; AIM-9L Sidewinder air-to-air missiles to improve the F-15s' defensive aerial-combat capability; and KC-707 aerial tankers to refuel both the F-15s and the AWACS. The total cost of this equipment to Saudi Arabia will be some \$8.5 billion.^{3 4 5 6 7 8}

This Saudi equipment package is an important part of a comprehensive U.S. strategy for the Southwest Asia region, designed to increase the security of friendly governments in that area—which is vital to both the United States and to its allies. In this context, the proposed sale will directly serve U.S. national interests in the following ways:⁹

- First, it will help the Saudis defend their vital oil resources against the danger of attack. This is an essential element in deterring aggression and enhancing stability in this key area of the world.¹⁰
- Second, it will help to rebuild confidence in the United States as a nation that can be relied upon to live up to its commitments. This reliability is essential if there is to be any chance of reducing the political risks a durable peace in the Middle East demands.¹¹
- Further, it will advance our goal of increasing the security of states in the Gulf region by providing a foundation for closer U.S.–Saudi defense cooperation and for Saudi efforts to develop cooperation with their Middle Eastern neighbors in other security-related areas.¹²
- Finally, it will increase the effectiveness of our own military capabilities if we are ever

called upon to deploy U.S. forces to the area. The logistics base and support infrastructure that will be a necessary part of this equipment package will be fully compatible with the defense needs of this vital area.¹³

Saudi oil resources are vast and irreplaceable. We need them, and our allies need them. The flow of oil from Saudi Arabia and the region immediately bordering it in the Gulf is vital to the international financial system, the economies of the developing nations, and world trade. In fact, the destruction of the oil gathering and loading facilities of Saudi Arabia—either by accident or by a hostile power—could paralyze a major part of the world's economy.¹⁴

Saudi oil resources are also vulnerable and threatened. Virtually all of Saudi Arabia's oil-processing facilities are located in the eastern part of the country near the coast—across the Gulf from Iran. If the widely held assumption that oil-producing states, acting in their own self-interest, would not threaten each other's oil fields, refineries, or transport facilities were valid, we would be less concerned. But Iran and Iraq have done just that; each has been required to curtail oil exports vitally needed by the West. I might add that Saudi Arabia has increased its oil production to accommodate that loss while keeping prices below those of its OPEC colleagues. This is simply another of many instances of Saudi assistance to our national interests.¹⁵

As the anti-Communist leader of moderate Arab Gulf states and as the largest free-world oil producer, Saudi Arabia needs a strong defense against potential military threats from unstable, revolutionary Iran; from radical Iraq; and from Marxist South Yemen. The Kingdom also must increase its defenses against Soviet—or Soviet-inspired—military threats from South Yemen, from Afghanistan, and from the USSR itself. There is great interest in both Tehran and Baghdad in Saudi oil fields and shipment routes; and thousands of miles of oil pipeline across Saudi Arabia are vulnerable to their missiles.¹⁶ The need to protect this vital lifeline to the West adds an unwelcome dimension to the already dangerous territorial conflict now underway between Iran and Iraq.

Given this situation, the Saudis face several difficulties in deploying an adequate air defense. Their population is widely scattered; concentrated population centers—as well as oil fields and ports—are located in the East and are relatively close to potential adversaries on or near the Iranian coast and the Red Sea coasts, which means it is not possible to place early-warning radars and air defenses far forward—say, between the oil facilities and potential threats from across the Gulf—to provide adequate protection. With current Saudi capabilities, an attack by low-flying aircraft could not be detected by ground-based radar until it was within two to four minutes of the oil fields. Even under the best conditions, no air force could respond to this threat in time.¹⁷

AWACS would allow the Saudi Air Force to detect low-level, attacking enemy aircraft up to 200 miles from the oil fields. The Saudi Air Force would then have the required warning to intercept

and defeat enemy aircraft before they reached the oil fields; and without AWACS, this kind of air-defense capability would not exist, no matter how many ground radars might be employed.¹⁸

AIM-9L Sidewinder air-to-air missiles would give the Saudi Air Force the ability to counter a variety of modern threats. They would greatly improve the capability of the Saudi Air Force to defend against aggressive, modern Soviet tactical aircraft now deployed in the Middle East. The AIM-9L would permit defense against aircraft from any angle, including head-on. This missile also would provide a far more effective air-to-air capability than anything the Saudis have today—particularly against the kinds of aircraft and tactics employed by Iran and Iraq against each other over the past year.¹⁹

KC-707 tankers would allow AWACS to remain on station for extended periods of time and would allow F-15s to be based in central and southwestern Saudi Arabia—locations less vulnerable to surprise enemy attack—while still sustaining combat air patrols over the oil facilities even if bases in eastern Saudi Arabia were put out of action.²⁰

Consequently, we believe that Saudi Arabia has a legitimate defense requirement for AWACS and the other air-defense enhancement equipment. The package would improve Saudi capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defeat air attacks. The result would be a more secure Saudi Arabia—an anchor of stability in the region and a bulwark against aggression or coercion from outside the region. Such a strong Saudi Arabia clearly serves the security interests of the United States, and certainly serves the security interests of Israel, the NATO countries, and Japan.²¹

Last fall, soon after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, the United States responded to Saudi defense concerns by deploying four U.S. Air Force AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia. They operated there from October 1980 to February 1981, with U.S. crews. The AWACS performed extremely well in deterring potential air attacks and in monitoring military activity in the Gulf region. The United States has helped in this way before and will no doubt help again under similar circumstances. However, Saudi Arabia is a sovereign state and recognizes its right and responsibility to provide for its own legitimate defense requirements. It is in this spirit that the request to purchase AWACS and the other air-defense items was made by Saudi Arabia. Consummation of the sale—which both we and they agree they urgently need to meet their security requirements—will further reinforce the military-to-military relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. This, in turn, will strengthen the security of the entire region and will permit us to work with the Saudis in seeking a more peaceful and stable situation in the whole region, specifically including Israel.²²

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that rejection of this proposed sale would very adversely affect future U.S.–Saudi relations. Such a rejection would cause the Saudis to doubt the reliability of U.S. commitments and the ability of successive Presidents to conduct foreign policy. It would also make it far less likely that Saudi Arabia would join the United States in

closer military cooperation—joint planning, combined exercises, intelligence cooperation, and logistics support—all of which are essential if the United States is to protect its interests and defend the sea and air lanes of the Southwest Asia region. It would also make the Saudis more susceptible to Soviet efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and Israel.²³

This Saudi air-defense enhancement package has been designed to meet significant Saudi defense requirements while improving the security of Israel and all the other states in the region. Israel has increased its margin of military superiority over its Arab adversaries since the 1973 war. With or without the AWACS and the F-15 enhancements, the Saudi Air Force poses no significant threat to Israel's security—even in the context of a general regional conflict. This assessment is supported by the U.S. intelligence community.²⁴

These are the technical facts: AWACS is an unarmed, flying radar platform that has no intelligence-collection capability. It cannot detect ground targets such as tanks, and it cannot operate effectively with air forces of other countries without extensive joint training and sophisticated communications equipment—which only the United States can provide. The AWACS to be sold to Saudi Arabia are designed to conduct continuous surveillance within Saudi airspace. To employ them in a manner hostile to Israel would be prohibitively difficult; operating outside Saudi airspace would leave them vulnerable to air attack from every direction.²⁵

The simple fact is that this sale will not alter the Arab–Israeli balance of power materially nor jeopardize Israel's security. President Reagan is committed to protecting Israel's security and to preserving Israel's qualitative edge and its ability to defeat any combination of hostile forces in the region. The proposed Saudi sale neither casts doubt on that commitment nor compromises Israeli capabilities.²⁶

There is an additional point related to Israeli security. The Saudis do not face a choice between U.S. AWACS or nothing. The British NIMROD airborne early-warning aircraft, currently under advanced development, has capabilities comparable to the AWACS. If the AWACS sale were rejected, the Saudis could turn to the British to purchase NIMRODs, which will be operationally deployed shortly.²⁷

Therefore, the issue is not whether the Saudis will acquire an enhancement of their security; rather, it is whether the credibility and influence of the United States will be strengthened or undermined by this decision. Our interests—political, economic, and strategic—are far better served by a continuing and strengthened U.S. role in Saudi Arabia, with U.S. training, equipment, and oversight, than by a Saudi Arabia that acquires similar capabilities elsewhere, with the United States excluded and with the risk of continuing, perhaps needless, hostility in Israel.²⁸

Before I conclude, let me address one other point. The AWACS is a very capable system, but

selling it to Saudi Arabia does not pose serious risks that sensitive technology will be compromised. The AWACS does not represent the ultimate in U.S. radar and computer technology. The radar is a mid-1960s pulse-Doppler set; the computer technology is comparable to that used in many universities. While these systems are superior to anything now in the Saudi operational inventory, a new Soviet airborne early-warning aircraft has been under development for some time and is expected to have a capability quite similar to the AWACS. This new Soviet aircraft should be in the operational inventory quite soon—before the AWACS are delivered to Saudi Arabia in late 1985.²⁹

Technology security is, nevertheless, a serious matter. The systems, equipment, and information will be protected, and the Saudis recognize their obligations. Consequently, they have agreed to extensive joint training and to stringent security arrangements that protect sensitive U.S. technology under our proposed plan.³⁰

Let me conclude by saying that we are convinced—and the President is convinced—that detailed and dispassionate analysis shows the proposed air-defense enhancement package for Saudi Arabia will make an important contribution to the security of all states in the region—Israel as well as Saudi Arabia—and that it will promote our efforts to create a strategic consensus in the Southwest Asia region and thereby further our national-security interests.³¹

The proposed sale successfully balances the imperative of Israeli security with the need to respond to threats to essential natural resources and regional stability. It provides equipment that meets the defensive requirements of a close friend and key state in the region, protects sensitive technology, and makes a tangible contribution to U.S. military capabilities.³²

Notes

1. **Scope of the package / AECA process.** The administration notified Congress of a Saudi purchase including **five E-3A AWACS** and supporting items; opponents sought a **joint resolution of disapproval** under the **Arms Export Control Act (AECA)** to block it.
2. **Stakeholders beyond the Gulf.** The argument linked Gulf stability to global interests (fueling **NATO**, **Japan**, and world trade) and to U.S. mediation credibility in Arab–Israeli diplomacy.
3. **E-3A AWACS.** Boeing 707-based **airborne warning and control** platform with AN/APY-1/2 radar for long-range air surveillance and battle management; the aircraft themselves carry **no weapons**.
4. **C2 network enhancements.** The package's **ground control and communications** pieces were meant to create an integrated **air-defense surveillance and control** architecture.
5. **Conformal fuel tanks (CFTs).** External tanks fitted to **F-15s** to extend range/endurance without occupying weapon stations; viewed as defensive enablers of CAP endurance.
6. **AIM-9L Sidewinder.** First widely fielded **all-aspect** IR missile variant, enabling **head-on**

engagements; a focal point of Israeli/QME concerns.

7. **KC-707 tankers.** Tanker variant of the Boeing 707 to extend **AWACS** on-station time and **F-15** patrol reach; complements limited forward basing.
8. **Cost & delivery timeline.** The administration cited ~\$8.5B total cost and **mid-1980s** deliveries—part of the case that near-term balance-of-power effects would be minimal.
9. **Southwest Asia strategy.** Framed within the post-**Iranian Revolution (1979)** and **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979)** environment and the **Carter Doctrine** commitment to defend the Gulf.
10. **Oil infrastructure risk.** Saudi hubs (**Abqaiq**, **Ras Tanura**, etc.) were assessed as **high-value**, **high-vulnerability** targets whose loss could have global economic effects.
11. **Reliability signal.** The sale was cast as a test of U.S. **credibility** with moderate Arabs after late-1970s shocks; defeat was said to damage broader U.S. influence.
12. **Building cooperation.** The package underpinned deeper **U.S.–Saudi mil-to-mil** ties and meshed with emerging **regional cooperation** (e.g., **GCC** formed May 1981).
13. **U.S. contingency access.** Infrastructure and interoperability were argued to assist U.S. **deployments** if requested, improving responsiveness.
14. **Global dependence.** Emphasized that **Saudi/Gulf** flows were critical to the **OECD** economies and developing world, not just the U.S.
15. **Iran–Iraq war context.** Since Sept **1980**, both combatants struck oil infrastructure; Saudi output increases helped offset losses, often at **lower prices** than some **OPEC** peers.
16. **Threat set.** Listed regional and Soviet-aligned risks (e.g., **South Yemen**, **Afghanistan**), and missile/air threats to pipelines/ports; rationale for **layered air defense**.
17. **Radar coverage limits.** Low-altitude ingress can exploit **ground-radar horizon**; Weinberger cites **2–4 minute** warning without airborne early warning.
18. **AWACS detection/intercept window.** Airborne radar provides **low-level detection ~200 nm** out, enabling **intercept tasking** before targets reach oil sites.
19. **AIM-9L and adversary aircraft.** All-aspect missile enhances **F-15** lethality against contemporary **Soviet-type** fighters observed in the region.
20. **Tanker-enabled basing resilience.** **KC-707** refueling supports **CAP** while dispersing **F-15s** away from the vulnerable Eastern Province.
21. **“Anchor of stability.”** Administration shorthand for a **strong, defended Saudi Arabia** as a bulwark against coercion and a partner in regional moderation.
22. **Prior U.S. AWACS deployments.** U.S. AWACS operated from Saudi soil **Oct 1980–Feb 1981** with **U.S. crews**, cited as precedent and proof of deterrent value.

23. **Risks of rejection.** Forecasted harm to **U.S.–Saudi** ties, reduced **mil-to-mil** cooperation, and openings for **Soviet** exploitation and intra-alliance friction.
24. **Intelligence community assessment.** The administration cited **IC** judgments that the package would not create a **Saudi threat** to Israel nor undercut Israel's **QME**.
25. **AWACS employment & vulnerability.** Argued that Saudi AWACS were configured for **defensive, in-kingdom** surveillance; outside Saudi airspace they would be **high-value, vulnerable** targets.
26. **QME assurance.** Reiterated U.S. commitment to preserve Israel's **qualitative military edge** via parallel assistance/assurances.
27. **British NIMROD AEW.** The **Nimrod AEW3** was the cited alternative; its availability was used to argue Saudis had **other sources**, reducing leverage if the U.S. said no.
28. **U.S. role vs. alternatives.** The administration preferred **U.S.-supplied** capabilities with **U.S. oversight** to third-party systems that could limit U.S. influence.
29. **Soviet AEW.** Pointed to the developing **Soviet A-50 “Mainstay”** AEW platform and projected fielding **before 1985**, arguing Saudi AWACS would not reveal uniquely advanced tech.
30. **Tech-security safeguards.** Included **joint training**, rigorous **physical/operational security**, and **U.S. presence/inspection** to mitigate compromise risks.
31. **Strategic consensus.** Goal of aligning moderate regional states with the U.S. against **Soviet** threats and fostering stability compatible with **Camp David** diplomacy.
32. **Balancing test.** Final claim that the package **protected technology, met defensive needs**, and **aided U.S. forces**, while **preserving Israel's security**.

Testimony by the Honorable Alexander M. Haig, Jr.
Secretary of State
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — Open Session

October 1, 1981

I would like to start by summarizing what I discussed with you in more detail in executive session this morning.

For several months we have been working with the Saudis to develop arrangements that will meet the concerns that the Congress has expressed about the proposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia.¹ These discussions have now been concluded.

We believe that the resulting understandings, which will come into effect after consummation of the sale, will ensure the security of the AWACS system³ and the degree of continuing U.S. participation in Saudi AWACS operations that respond to the fundamental concerns about the sale that have been raised during the course of our consultations with the Congress.²

The Saudis have agreed to ensure an important U.S. role in the development of the Saudi air defense system and to move forward in other ways to deepen the longstanding security cooperation between our two countries, in which we have played a key role in training the Saudi Air Force. Within this framework, we have reached understandings on a number of specific provisions governing the AWACS aircraft that provide important answers to security interests. These arrangements have been reached in the context of firm Saudi agreement on information-sharing⁴, security of equipment, no unauthorized transfer of data or equipment⁵, and use of the AWACS only in a defensive mission within Saudi borders⁷.

This means:

- There will be complete data-sharing with the United States on a continuous basis.⁴
- There will be no sharing of AWACS data with any other parties without U.S. consent.⁵
- Only carefully screened Saudi and U.S. nationals will be permitted to be involved with these aircraft. Given the shortage of Saudi aircrews and technicians, this means that there will be an American presence in the aircraft and on the ground well into the 1990s.⁶
- There will be no operation of Saudi AWACS outside Saudi airspace.⁷
- There will be extensive and elaborate security measures for safeguarding equipment and technology, including:

- U.S. inspection teams will monitor the performance of all equipment associated with the AWACS sale;⁸
- Special facilities will be constructed to provide round-the-clock security protection against unauthorized entry;⁸
- All of the agreed security arrangements must be approved by the United States at least one year before any AWACS are delivered to the Saudis.⁸

Taken together, this package of safeguards and agreements addresses the fundamental concerns that have been voiced about the sale and also reflects a Saudi willingness to work with us and engage our mutual concerns.

Far more is involved in the proposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia than the technical capabilities of five aircraft. At stake is whether the United States will be able to pursue a coherent policy in a region where the Arab–Israeli dispute divides our closest friends and where the Soviets and their proxies threaten our vital interests.⁹

Our strategy must vigorously pursue both peace and security. Progress toward each of these twin goals supports progress toward the other. If our friends are more secure, they will be more able to take risks for peace. If there is progress toward peace, the cooperation that is vital for security will be easier.⁹

The “consensus of strategic concern” among our friends in the Middle East is not a figment of the imagination. The fragile cease-fire along the Israeli–Lebanese border demonstrates a widespread understanding of the need for peace and a recognition that only the Soviet Union and its proxies benefit from violence.¹⁰

Israeli restraint and Saudi cooperation have brought about a result crucial to progress toward a new balance in the region. There are many people who are alive in the Middle East today because of those efforts. We will continue, through the efforts of Ambassador Habib and the good offices of Saudi Arabia, to seek progress toward peace in Lebanon.¹⁰

The most important cooperation in the Middle East today is the cooperation between Israel and Egypt in the peace process. President Reagan has affirmed his personal commitment to the Camp David agreements and the process they have set in motion. We welcome enthusiastically the decision by Egypt and Israel to resume the autonomy negotiations and we look forward to the fruits of those negotiations.¹¹

In the wake of the shocks of the last few years, countries in the region also recognize the need for greater cooperation to rebuild regional security. Developing Egyptian and Israeli security cooperation with the United States; the Gulf Cooperation Council that has been newly created

under Saudi leadership; and Saudi security assistance to a number of threatened states are all signs of this growing recognition.¹²

Our policy is to pursue enhanced security cooperation with all of our friends in the region. We do not seek a massive structure of bases, a pervasive presence, and dependent client-states. We respect the sovereignty of our friends and want to help them preserve their independence.

Our regional strategy consists of the following elements:

- Improving our own military position in and near the region;
- Strengthening the defense capabilities of our friends;
- Restoring confidence in the United States as a reliable partner; and
- Pursuing a permanent peace in the region.

The proposed sale contributes importantly to each of these elements.

First, the information-sharing arrangements will also provide U.S. forces early warning of hostile activities in the Gulf.⁴ Moreover, the associated infrastructure to support U.S. deployment—should our assistance be requested in times of crisis—would be in place.

Second, the package will bolster Saudi capabilities to defend their country and their crucial oil facilities.

Third, it will also demonstrate that we take Saudi security needs seriously and can be counted on to help.

Fourth, a secure Saudi Arabia, confident of U.S. support, will be better able to proceed with its policy of encouraging all parties to move toward peace in the region.

We must not underestimate the range and severity of the unpredictable threats that arise in this turbulent region. Twice in less than two years, the United States has had to deploy AWACS to Saudi Arabia in response to unexpected threats—first during the Yemen crisis in 1979 and then during the Iran–Iraq war.¹³ Qaddafi has threatened to destroy Saudi oil facilities if the Saudis continue to maintain production levels that undercut Libya’s high oil prices. This morning’s Iranian air raid on Kuwait is dramatic evidence of the continued threat to the region’s stability.

For all these reasons, we believe the proposed sales serve vital U.S. interests. We recognize that the sales raise questions about Israeli security and about the compromise of advanced U.S. technology. In both cases, however, we believe these concerns have been effectively

accommodated by the arrangements I have just described and by our security and intelligence assistance to Israel.¹⁴¹⁵

The United States is fundamentally and unalterably committed to the security of Israel. A strong Israel is required by our interests and our hopes for peace and security in the Middle East. For our part, we are determined to take steps to minimize any adverse impact of the sale and to maintain the qualitative edge upon which Israel depends.¹⁵

President Reagan would not have authorized this sale if he believed it would jeopardize Israel's security. On the contrary, we believe that the risks for Israel are greater if U.S.–Saudi cooperation is disrupted and Saudi Arabia is left insecure or forced to turn elsewhere for equipment.⁹

Consider the risks of not making the sale. A veto would deal a serious setback to our efforts to counter Soviet and Soviet-proxy threats in the region and to move forward in the peace process. A veto would erode both U.S. and Saudi credibility. It is urgent to convince local countries that the United States has the military means to protect them and the will to do so. Strength and the capacity for decisive action are universally admired, and perhaps nowhere more than in the Middle East. Yet increasingly over the last few years, the states of this region have come to view us as vacillating and irresolute. Unless we change that perception, the costs of withstanding Soviet and radical pressures will outweigh the benefits of cooperating with us.¹⁶

We have begun to reverse the trend of rising doubts about the United States. Our determination to rebuild our military strength, our strategic discussions with our regional friends, our commitment to the Camp David peace process (including our participation in the Sinai Multinational Peace-Keeping Force), and our increased security assistance to threatened states have all begun to restore our reputation as a reliable partner.¹¹¹⁷

These positive trends will be damaged if the sale is turned down. Saudi confidence in the ability of the United States to conduct a coherent and effective foreign policy will be diminished. The painstaking task of restoring confidence and hope will, of necessity, have to begin again.

The United States and Saudi Arabia will remain bound together by common desires to avoid regional conflict and to counter Soviet threats. But if the Saudis question our reliability, will they feel more able to withstand pressure against closer cooperation with us in regional defense efforts? Will they feel more able to run risks and join the peace process—more willing to continue to help other threatened states? As President Sadat of Egypt himself said yesterday: “A refusal to give the AWACS will raise a huge question mark because Saudi Arabia is one of the closest American friends in the region.”¹⁸

The Saudis have shown sensitivity to our concerns far more than other suppliers would ask of them. We, for our part, must also show sensitivity to legitimate Saudi concerns about their

sovereignty and independence. Let me emphasize that this is not simply a matter of national pride on their part; it is a matter of sustaining credible and constructive Saudi leadership as a moderating influence in the Arab world.

We must not lose the opportunity we now have to work with a strengthened, confident Saudi Arabia that enjoys increasing influence in the Arab and Islamic world. The large and continuing U.S. role in the Saudi air defense program and the measures I have described today can and must be the foundation for further cooperation to protect our common interests in the vital Persian Gulf region.

Now it is for you to promote that prospect by your favorable decision on this crucial sale. Protecting our vital interests against the Soviets and their proxies demands no less. Building a lasting peace demands no less.

In the end, your approval will make the United States and all of our friends in the area more secure.

Notes

1. **What was at issue.** The administration had notified Congress of a proposed package including **five E-3A AWACS** and related support for **Saudi Arabia**; opponents sought a **joint resolution of disapproval** under the **Arms Export Control Act (AECA)** to block it. The Senate vote would come on **October 28, 1981** (failed 48–52, so the sale proceeded).
2. **“Resulting understandings.”** Haig refers to a bundle of **assurances and safeguards** negotiated with Riyadh to address congressional/security concerns: U.S. crew participation/oversight, data restrictions, basing/mission limits, hardening and inspection regimes, and a long **lead time** before delivery.
3. **AWACS basics.** The **E-3A Sentry** is an airborne radar/command platform (long-range air surveillance, identification, and battle management). It was framed as **defensive** early-warning; no strike weapons were part of the AWACS package.
4. **“Complete data-sharing.”** A central selling point: AWACS radar picture/data would be shared **continuously** with U.S. forces, improving **U.S. situational awareness** in the Gulf and supporting contingency planning.
5. **No third-party sharing.** Data release to any other state (including Arab partners) would require **U.S. consent**, aimed at preventing **compromise** of sensitive capabilities.
6. **U.S. presence into the 1990s.** Because of Saudi crew/technician shortfalls, the package implied a **sustained American presence** (aircrews, maintenance, training) well beyond initial delivery—an added layer of control.
7. **No operation outside Saudi airspace.** Mission/basing limitations were designed to reassure **Israel** and **Congress** that AWACS would not perform **offensive** or **regional** missions contrary to U.S.

policy.

8. **Security hardening/inspection.** The deal included U.S. **inspection teams**, **secure facilities**, and a requirement that **all protective arrangements** be **approved by the United States** at least a year before delivery.
9. **Haig's strategic frame.** He ties the sale to a broader **regional strategy**: peace and security as **mutually reinforcing**, countering **Soviet/proxy** influence, and restoring **U.S. credibility** after the late-1970s shocks (Iranian Revolution, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan).
10. **Lebanon cease-fire.** Reference is to the **July–August 1981** U.S.-brokered cease-fire along the Israeli–Lebanese border; **Ambassador Philip Habib** led the shuttle diplomacy.
11. **Camp David/autonomy talks.** The testimony reaffirms **Camp David** and the **Egypt–Israel** peace track; **autonomy negotiations** refer to Palestinian self-governing arrangements envisaged for the **West Bank/Gaza**.
12. **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).** Formed **May 1981** (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman) as a security/economic bloc; Haig cites it as evidence of **regional self-help** under Saudi leadership.
13. **AWACS deployments before 1981.** The U.S. had temporarily deployed AWACS to **Saudi Arabia** during the **North Yemen crisis (1979)** and early **Iran–Iraq War** contingencies (from 1980), which Haig invokes as proof of operational need.
14. **Technology-compromise concerns.** Critics feared **sensitive U.S. technology** could leak; the administration argued that the **safeguards + U.S. presence** mitigated risk and that Israel's **qualitative military edge (QME)** would be preserved through parallel measures.
15. **Israeli security pledge.** Haig restates the standard U.S. commitment: Israel's security and **QME** are **unalterable**; the sale was presented as **compatible** with those commitments.
16. **“Costs of a veto.”** The administration warned that rejecting the sale would **erode U.S. credibility** with moderate Arabs (especially **Saudi Arabia**), hamper **coalition-building**, and encourage **Soviet/radical** inroads.
17. **Multinational Force and Observers (MFO).** Haig's mention of the “Sinai Multilateral Peace-Keeping Force” refers to the **MFO** established to supervise **Sinai** arrangements after Israel's withdrawal—another signal of U.S. follow-through on peace commitments.
18. **Sadat's public support.** President **Anwar Sadat** publicly backed the sale, arguing that denying AWACS to Saudi Arabia would undermine a key **American partner**—a message the administration used with Congress.

Stansfield Turner
No to AWACS

The Washington Post

April 23, 1981

Adm. Turner, formerly Director of Central Intelligence, is a lecturer, writer, and consultant.¹

For more than 20 years, the United States helped the Shah of Iran to build that country into the strongest military power in the Middle East.² The Shah's taste for the most sophisticated military hardware in our inventory was legend, and his shopping list was long, although Iran, a nation of 36 million, lacked the technical expertise to maintain and fully use the equipment it bought. Accordingly, it also had to purchase foreign technical help and support to keep its military machine running. We all know what happened.³

In 1978, the Carter administration, with the consent of Congress, agreed to sell our newest and most advanced fighter aircraft, the F-15, to Saudi Arabia.⁴

Because of the potential threat to Israel, Congress was explicitly promised that we would not also sell the Saudis the extra fuel tanks that would extend the F-15's range, or bomb racks that would turn it into an attack aircraft.⁵ By the spring of 1980, the Saudis were back asking for these external equipment as well as the super-sophisticated Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS). AWACS is a Boeing 707 with a large rotating radar antenna on top and a complex of computer systems inside. It detects other aircraft at great distances and tracks all air activity within its zone of coverage.⁶

The Saudi rationale for their need for these additional F-15 equipment and AWACS was that their situation had changed since they contracted for their F-15s in 1979: Iran had fallen into less friendly hands, and the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan.⁷ It would, therefore, be in the best interest of both the United States and Saudi Arabia—unquestionably a pro-Western force in the Middle East—for the Saudis to strengthen their ability to counter any other hostile moves in the region.

Their real concern, which is not a part of their argument, was that two years had elapsed and the Saudis had not seen enough progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. To test our resolve to push for a solution acceptable to the Arabs, the Saudis were asking us to take an action that would be opposed by Israel—to see whether we would eventually pressure Israel into making concessions on the Palestinian question.⁸ They were also buying time with the radical Arabs: by obtaining such a visible symbol of U.S. support, they could demonstrate that their limited association with the United States had value and thus ward off pressure to break with the United States or to use

the oil weapon against us.⁹

Having given the Saudis the F-15s in 1978, it would be difficult to deny them the extra equipment under the present circumstances. Admittedly, long-range F-15s and AWACS in Saudi hands will present some added risk to the Israelis, but they are fully capable of handling it. Whether we should permit the Saudis to purchase AWACS is another question. The Saudis are our friends. Providing them with AWACS would not be a friendly act because it would not be in their best interests. It is such a complex piece of military equipment that there is no way the Saudi military establishment could operate or maintain a fleet of them on its own. Saudi Arabia has only ~4 million nationals to draw on and has a lower technical/educational base than Iran in the late 1970s.¹⁰ Even with extensive outside technical assistance, sustaining the AWACS would be a severe drain on Saudi military technical resources. In the long run, they would resent their dependence.¹¹

More important, it would distract the attention of the Saudi leadership from more urgent military tasks. The most likely threats to Saudi Arabia are internal disorder or rebellion and guerrilla warfare encouraged and supported by its neighbors.¹² It would be wishful thinking to believe that a nation in as great a state of flux as Saudi Arabia would not be subject to domestic unrest or subversion.

When such troubles develop, the Saudi security forces must have the capability of grappling with them.

In November 1979, Saudi military and domestic security forces proved themselves inept in quelling a minor disruption at the Great Mosque in Mecca.¹³ This was apparently a purely domestic matter, but in the future the Saudis must worry about subversion fomented by South Yemen (with a Soviet foothold); disorders in the vital oil fields (with large numbers of Shia potentially responsive to Khomeini-inspired movements); and perhaps even armed clashes with neighboring Iraq.¹⁴ The Saudis are not well prepared for any of these contingencies today. They have turned to Pakistan to supply mercenaries, but the monarchy should have loyal, fully controlled military and internal security forces of its own.¹⁵

Against this background, it would be irresponsible for us to help them prepare to defeat a sophisticated air threat, for which AWACS was designed and which has a low probability, when they are incapable of handling the more elementary threats of insurrection and guerrilla warfare that are highly probable. As friends, we should try to draw their attention to the realities of their situation.

They do not need the AWACS nearly as much as they need other forms of military equipment and training. There is no way they can absorb AWACS into their military structure without detracting from their primary concerns. Even if there are short-term advantages to the United

States in establishing some continuing military presence on the Arabian Peninsula through the provision of AWACS, we should forgo that in favor of doing what a genuine and long-term friend would do: be frank and put the friend's interests up front. That is the only way to protect our interests, anyway. Clearly this will not be an immediately popular response, but friends should not aspire to popularity.

We can mitigate the impact on the Saudis of turning them down on AWACS. We could give them a squadron of F-15s immediately, several years ahead of the delivery of those they are purchasing. The U.S. Air Force would have to maintain and operate these for them for several years while Saudi pilots and mechanics complete their training. The Saudis, however, would see that we are serious about helping them all we can. They would also see, in time, that the way to be a friend is to be honest and frank rather than to say yes to an ill-advised request.¹⁶

Notes

1. **Stansfield Turner.** Admiral Turner (USN) served as **Director of Central Intelligence (1977–81)** under President Carter; previously **NATO Allied Forces Southern Europe** and **President, Naval War College**.
2. **Iranian buildup context.** Under the Shah (especially after the 1973 oil windfall), Iran purchased large quantities of **U.S. advanced systems** (e.g., **F-14, F-4, Phoenix missiles**), becoming a principal regional military power.
3. **“We all know what happened.”** The **Iranian Revolution (1979)** led to collapse of the Shah's regime; much of the sophisticated force proved **unsustainable** without U.S. support and trained personnel.
4. **1978 Saudi F-15 sale.** The Carter administration's controversial approval of **F-15s** for Saudi Arabia passed Congress with **assurances** limiting **range/strike** capabilities (no **CFTs** or **bomb racks**).
5. **Congressional assurances.** The 1978 assurances were central to the debate; the 1981 package sought to **add CFTs, AIM-9L, KC-707s, and AWACS**, raising concerns about **pledge erosion**.
6. **AWACS system.** E-3A with **rotodome** radar; provides **long-range airborne surveillance/command**; described here to emphasize its sophistication relative to Saudi manpower base.
7. **Changed threat environment.** **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Dec 1979)** and **Iranian Revolution** were commonly cited by the administration as reasons to **enhance Saudi defenses**.
8. **Leverage on the peace track.** Turner's view that Riyadh also sought to **test U.S. resolve** to press **Israel** on the **Palestinian question**, using AWACS as a proxy issue.
9. **“Oil weapon.”** Reference to the **1973–74 OAPEC embargo** precedent; Turner posits Saudis sought U.S. gestures to **blunt radical Arab pressure** to use oil leverage again.

10. **Saudi manpower/education constraint.** Early-1980s estimates often cited ~**8 million total population** but ~**4–5 million nationals**; **technical workforce** limitations made **self-sustained AWACS ops** doubtful without heavy long-term U.S. presence.
11. **Dependence resentment.** A frequent critique: high-end systems can breed **political friction** if reliance on foreign crews/contractors becomes prolonged.
12. **Internal security emphasis.** Turner argues **counterinsurgency/internal defense** (gendarmerie, intelligence, mobile forces) should trump **high-end air defense** in Saudi priorities.
13. **Mecca seizure (Nov 1979).** Insurgents seized the **Grand Mosque**; Saudi forces struggled, ultimately retaking it with assistance (including **French advisors/equipment**).
14. **Regional subversion risks.** **PDRY (South Yemen)** hosted pro-Soviet elements; **Eastern Province** Shia unrest (inspired partly by **Khomeini**) surfaced in 1979; **Iraq** border tensions persisted during the **Iran–Iraq War**.
15. **Pakistani personnel.** Saudis hired **Pakistani troops/technicians** in the late 1970s–80s to augment security forces—evidence, to Turner, of **structural manpower gaps**.
16. **Alternative mitigation.** Turner’s proposal—**earlier F-15s** operated/maintained initially by the **USAF**—was intended to address **near-term defense needs** without committing to **AWACS** and its sustainment burden.

CIA Director Casey to former Director Turner

September 11, 1981

Dear Stan,

I want to apologize for the delay in responding to your request for clearance of your latest article on the AWACS.¹ As you know, I and those charged with handling our relationship with Saudi Arabia have been greatly concerned about the reaction of the Saudi Arabian leadership that your previous article on the AWACS was a breach of trust and confidence which they had placed in you and this organization.^{2 3}

It’s important to me for you to understand that I want to be as helpful to you as I can. I have always had the most friendly and cooperative relationships with my predecessors in the other senior posts in government which I have held. I very much want that to continue with you.⁴

I hope that you will understand that I have no wish to inhibit you from expressing your opinion or taking a position on any issue. I am concerned only with discharging my responsibility to

protect a national and institutional asset, the relationship and confidence which you helped to build with the Saudis and which I have an obligation to preserve as best as I can.⁵

You have my assurances that the deletions which we find it necessary to require have been very carefully considered by several senior officials here from both a legal and security standpoint. I hope you will be able to accept them.⁶

Yours,

(Bill)

William J. Casey⁷

Notes

1. **“Clearance ... article on the AWACS.”** Former intelligence officials are bound by **prepublication review** procedures; in 1981 the CIA’s **Publications Review Board** vetted writings to prevent disclosure of classified information. The timing coincided with the heated **AWACS-to-Saudi** debate in Congress (final Senate vote Oct 28, 1981).
2. **“Those charged with handling our relationship with Saudi Arabia.”** A reference to U.S. **intelligence/diplomatic management** of the sensitive **U.S.–Saudi** relationship, which the administration feared could be **politically or operationally damaged** by public critiques during the AWACS fight.
3. **“Previous article ... breach of trust.”** Casey alludes to Adm. **Stansfield Turner’s** op-ed, **“No to AWACS”** (*Washington Post*, Apr. 23, 1981), which argued against the sale and, according to Casey, was seen by **Saudi leaders** as a **breach of confidence** given Turner’s former role as **DCI**.
4. **“Predecessors ... other senior posts.”** Casey had held multiple senior posts (e.g., **SEC Chairman**, **Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs**) before becoming **Director of Central Intelligence (DCI)** in 1981; he is signaling a desire for **collegial continuity** with ex-officials like Turner.
5. **“Protect a national and institutional asset ... relationship and confidence ... you helped to build.”** U.S.–Saudi **intelligence and security cooperation** (oil security, regional threats, Afghan war beginnings) was treated as a **strategic asset**; Casey credits Turner’s tenure for contributing to that **trust** and stresses his duty to **preserve** it amid the AWACS controversy.
6. **“The deletions ... legal and security standpoint.”** Standard language for **redactions** required by prepublication review to avoid **classified disclosures** (sources/methods, foreign liaison sensitivities) and to mitigate **foreign-policy fallout** with Saudi Arabia during the pending sale.
7. **“William J. Casey.”** Then–**Director of Central Intelligence** under President **Reagan**. The informal “Bill” underscores a **personal appeal** to Turner to accept the **requested edits** without implying an attempt to silence his views.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Former National Security Officials on the Sale of AWACS Planes

October 5, 1981

The President: This distinguished bipartisan group of former national security officials have agreed to the following statement of support for the sale of AWACS and other air defense equipment to Saudi Arabia.¹ After reading this statement, both Harold Brown and Henry Kissinger would like to make a further statement of their own.

The statement is:

“The sale of AWACS and other air defense equipment to Saudi Arabia would make a substantial contribution to the national security interests of the United States in a vital part of the world. The rejection of this sale would damage the ability of the United States to conduct a credible and effective foreign policy, not only in the Gulf region, but across a broad range of issues.”

I want to thank each one of these gentlemen who are here for their recognition that this sale is in the national security interests of the Nation.² Their public appearance at this time is an indication of the broad bipartisan support this sale has among knowledgeable former national security officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations, going all the way back to the Eisenhower administration.³

And we believe, as I’ve said before, that not only is what we’re talking about in the interest of our national security, but it is in the best interests of the national security of our friend and ally, Israel.⁴

Now, Henry. Dr. Kissinger.

Dr. Kissinger: Mr. President, I’m aware of the intense debate that is going on on this issue, and I can sympathize with many of the concerns that have been expressed. It is my strong conviction, however, that these concerns cannot be met by rejecting the sale of AWACS. I believe the sale is in the national interests of the United States; it is compatible with the security of Israel; it is essential for the peace process in the Middle East; and it is important for the President’s ability to conduct an effective and credible foreign policy. And so, I would urge those who have legitimate concerns to meet them in conversation with the administration, and to vote for the AWACS package without attaching conditions that are incompatible with the dignity of Saudi Arabia and with the effective conduct of our foreign policy.⁵

The President: Thank you very much. And now, former Secretary Brown.

Mr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. President. I believe that American national security depends very strongly on the preservation of peace and of a favorable situation in Southwest Asia. One can understand the arguments that well-meaning opponents of the AWACS transfer make. I believe that when these are weighed against the advantages that this sale brings to U.S. national security, that the conclusion is that it would not help U.S. security, it would not help Israeli security, to have this sale rejected.⁶

I think that both from a military point of view and from a diplomatic point of view the transfer is advantageous to the United States—from a military point of view in terms of the ability it gives us to have information on air movements in the area, and from a diplomatic point of view because the United States needs, if it is to continue to contribute to the peace process, to have close relations with Israel, with Saudi Arabia, and with other countries in the region. I think that would be severely damaged if this sale were overturned.⁷

I hope that the Members of Congress who are going to consider this matter take into full consideration these facets of the issue. And when they do, I believe that they should come out in favor.

Thank you.

The President: Well, this concludes, but I think you can all see that there's a who's who roster here of men who have served this country over a great many years and have proven today they continue to serve any time they're needed.

And on behalf of all the people of this country, I just want to express my heartfelt thanks to all of you for being here today and doing this. Thank you very much.⁸

Note: The President spoke at 1:10 p.m. at the North Portico of the White House. Earlier, the President hosted a reception in the Rose Garden and a luncheon in the State Dining Room for the former government officials. In addition to former National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the statement on the sale of AWACS planes and other equipment to Saudi Arabia was issued by former Defense Secretaries Melvin R. Laird, Robert S. McNamara, Elliot L. Richardson, Donald Rumsfeld, and James R. Schlesinger; former National Security Advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski, McGeorge Bundy, Gordon Gray, Walt W. Rostow, and Brent Scowcroft; former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor; and former Secretary of State William P. Rogers.⁹

Notes

1. **What was being sold.** The 1981 package notified to Congress included **five E-3A AWACS** to Saudi Arabia, associated support and training, and enhancements to Saudi **F-15** capabilities (e.g.,

conformal fuel tanks and tanker support), framed as **air defense** and early-warning rather than offensive strike.

2. **Why Reagan staged this event.** By early October the administration faced strong **congressional opposition**; assembling eminent former officials signaled **bipartisan national-security backing** to sway undecided Senators.
3. **Bipartisan signatories.** The list spans **Democratic and Republican** administrations from **Eisenhower** through **Carter**—notably **McNamara** (JFK/LBJ), **Rumsfeld** (Ford), **Schlesinger** (Nixon/Ford), **Brown** (Carter), **Rogers** (Nixon), and NSAs across eras—underscoring **continuity** of U.S. Gulf interests.
4. **Assurances to Israel.** The administration paired the sale with **assurance letters** and follow-on measures to protect Israel’s **Qualitative Military Edge (QME)**, including constraints on AWACS operations (U.S. participation, basing/use limits, data-handling) and additional support to Israel.
5. **“Dignity of Saudi Arabia.”** A reference to congressional attempts to **condition** the sale with intrusive restrictions (e.g., basing, crewing, data-sharing, end-use), which Riyadh viewed as **demeaning**; Reagan/Kissinger argued over-conditioning would **kill** the strategic benefit.
6. **Brown’s cross-party weight.** As **Carter’s Democratic SecDef**, Brown’s support lent **bipartisan credibility**; he emphasized AWACS’ value for **situational awareness** over the Gulf and for **U.S. diplomacy** with both **Israel** and **moderate Arabs**.
7. **Strategic setting.** Post-**Iranian Revolution (1979)** and **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979)**, U.S. policy (Carter Doctrine, continued by Reagan) prioritized **Gulf security** and countering **Soviet influence**; bringing Saudi Arabia into a **cooperative security framework** was central to that.
8. **Public-pressure phase.** These remarks were part of a **full-court lobbying push** (speeches, briefings, calls) leading up to the Senate vote on a **joint resolution of disapproval** under the **Arms Export Control Act**.
9. **Outcome.** On **October 28, 1981**, the **Senate defeated** the disapproval resolution **52–48**, allowing the sale to proceed; the administration followed with additional **U.S.–Israel strategic cooperation** steps (e.g., the **Nov. 30, 1981** memorandum of understanding) to stabilize bilateral ties.

MEETING WITH SENATOR MARK ANDREWS (R-NORTH DAKOTA)

DATE: October 26, 1981¹⁰

LOCATION: The Oval Office

TIME: 10:55 – 11:15 a.m. (20 minutes)

FROM: Max Friedersdorf⁹

I. PURPOSE

To discuss the proposed Saudi AWACS sale.¹

II. BACKGROUND

Senator Andrews signed the Packwood resolution² but has indicated that he may be willing to “rethink” his position. Because he has been publicly positioned against the sale, Andrews would need a comfortable “excuse” for reversing himself. He was an early participant in the Mattingly–Quayle efforts to reach a compromise,³ and although Mattingly and Quayle did come to an agreement, Andrews did not come along with them. Max Friedersdorf has been working personally with Andrews in an effort to persuade him that the Presidential letter we intend to send will justify his support.⁴ It appears that we have an opportunity to bring Andrews on board.

While Andrews is undoubtedly susceptible to AIPAC lobbying,⁵ he does not have a considerable Jewish constituency nor is he under the pressure of an upcoming campaign.¹¹ Andrews has not made a strong pitch on the substantive merits of the sale. You should know that Dick Allen⁸ had a conversation with Andrews on June 23 at which time Andrews linked his position on AWACS to the funding of a synfuels plant in his state.⁶ He told Allen that if something could be done on the synfuels plant, he might have second thoughts about his opposition to AWACS. Something was done. The Administration has approved this synfuels plant at considerable cost and despite our efforts to promote budgetary savings in this area. Andrews seems to have forgotten about the synfuels plant, and it is possible that he will now bring up a new item on his “wish list,” that being the authority to involve the Federal Financing Bank (FFB) in a loan guarantee to the Great Plains Coal Gasification Project.⁷ OMB is opposed to the involvement of the FFB in these kinds of financial institutions.⁷

III. PARTICIPANTS

The President

The Vice President

Senator Mark Andrews

Staff

Ed Meese
Jim Baker
Dick Allen⁸
Max Friedersdorf⁹

IV. PRESS PLAN

White House photographer, no press.

V. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

Senator Andrews to arrive through the Southwest Gate, enter the Diplomatic Reception Room, and be escorted to the Oval Office for a 20-minute meeting with the President.

[Editorial note: Andrews voted for the sale, one of seven Republicans who cosponsored the anti-AWACS resolution but then switched.]

Notes

1. **AWACS sale:** Proposed transfer of **five E-3A Sentry AWACS** and related support to **Saudi Arabia**; opponents sought to block via a **joint resolution of disapproval** under the **Arms Export Control Act (AECA)**.
2. **Packwood resolution:** The Senate disapproval measure led by **Sen. Bob Packwood** opposing the Saudi package; public signers like Andrews needed a credible rationale to reverse.
3. **Mattingly–Quayle compromise:** Efforts by **Sens. Mack Mattingly** and **Dan Quayle** to frame added **safeguards/assurances** (U.S. crew roles, basing/mission limits, data protections) as an alternative to outright rejection.
4. **Presidential letter:** Assurances to Congress (and to Israel) that the sale would **not erode Israel’s qualitative military edge (QME)**, alongside **operational constraints** and enhanced **U.S.–Israel cooperation**.
5. **AIPAC lobbying:** The **American Israel Public Affairs Committee** coordinated an intensive Hill campaign against the sale; Andrews’s **North Dakota** constituency minimized direct electoral pressure.
6. **Synfuels linkage:** Andrews informally tied his AWACS stance to administration support for a **North Dakota synfuels plant** (the **Great Plains Coal Gasification Project**).
7. **FFB / OMB issue:** The **Federal Financing Bank** (Treasury-controlled) could lower borrowing costs; **OMB** opposed using FFB for such project finance due to hidden budget exposure; raised in context of **Great Plains** guarantees.

8. **Dick Allen:** **Richard V. Allen**, the President's **National Security Advisor**, handled part of the outreach; the **June 23** conversation set the synfuels–AWACS linkage.
9. **Max Friedersdorf:** Assistant to the President for **Legislative Affairs**, quarterbacking the Senate **whip effort** on AWACS.
10. **Timing relative to vote:** The meeting occurred **two days** before the decisive **Senate vote** on disapproval (**Oct 28, 1981**), which failed **52–48**, allowing the sale to proceed.
11. **Electoral calendar:** Andrews, newly elected to the Senate in **1980**, was **not up again until 1986**, reducing immediate campaign pressure.
12. **Outcome context:** Following the win, the administration paired the sale with additional **assurances** and a **U.S.–Israel strategic cooperation** memorandum (**Nov 30, 1981**) to steady bilateral relations.



AWACS plane.

MEETING WITH SENATOR WILLIAM ARMSTRONG (R-COLORADO)

DATE: October 26, 1981¹⁰

LOCATION: The Oval Office

TIME: 10:35 – 10:55 a.m. (20 minutes)

FROM: Max Friedersdorf¹¹

I. PURPOSE

To discuss the proposed Saudi AWACS sale.¹

II. BACKGROUND

Senator Armstrong has maintained an undecided posture on the AWACS issue. He is reluctant to oppose you, but has serious concerns about the sale, specifically the AIM-9L missile.² Armstrong is a deeply religious man and feels strongly about the security of Israel.³ He is being heavily lobbied by both sides on the AWACS sale.⁴

You should approach him on both a substantive basis—in terms of the benefits of the sale—as well as on a political basis. You should emphasize your determination to achieve a stable peace in the Middle East and reiterate your belief that this sale will contribute to that process and not be simply an escalation of the arms race.⁵ Point out that Israel already has the AIM-9L.⁶ Also, stress the Saudis' unblemished record in terms of security and point out the special security precautions they have agreed to for the AIM-9L and the AWACS.⁷ ⁸ Our intelligence also shows that the Soviets already have capabilities similar to those of the AIM-9L.⁹

III. PARTICIPANTS

The President

The Vice President

Senator William Armstrong¹²

Staff

Ed Meese

Jim Baker

Dick Allen

Max Friedersdorf¹¹

IV. PRESS PLAN

White House photographer, no press.

V. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

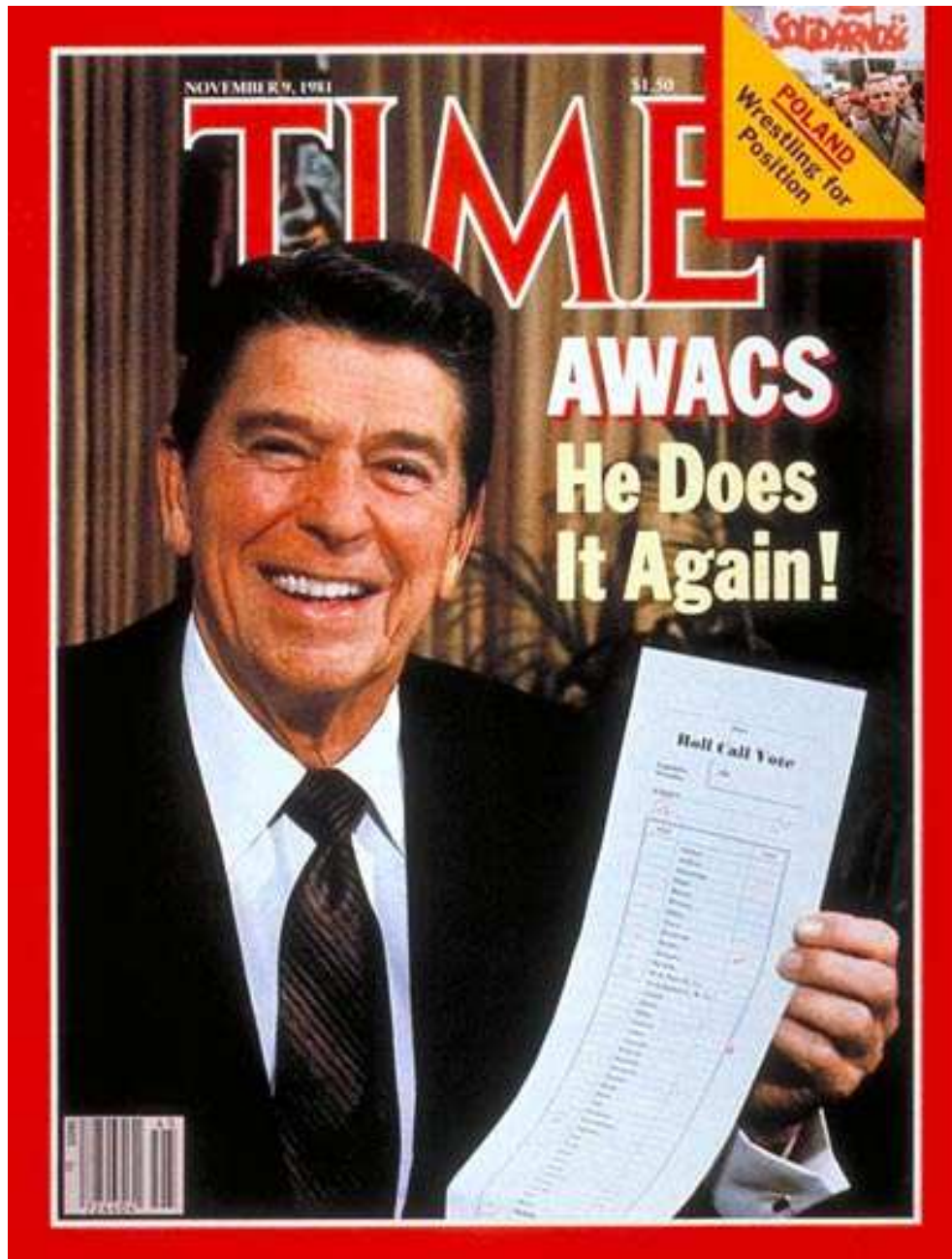
Senator Armstrong to arrive through the Southwest Gate, enter the Diplomatic Reception Room, and be escorted to the Oval Office for a 20-minute meeting with the President.

[Editorial note: Armstrong declared for the sale at the last minute, and voted for it.]

Notes

1. **AWACS sale / process.** The administration's package proposed **five E-3A Sentry AWACS** and associated support to **Saudi Arabia**; opponents sought to block it with a **joint resolution of disapproval** under the **Arms Export Control Act (AECA)**.
2. **AIM-9L Sidewinder.** An **all-aspect** infrared **air-to-air** missile (first widely fielded all-aspect variant of the Sidewinder) that can engage targets from the **front quarter**, raising concerns about qualitative impact if transferred.
3. **Armstrong profile.** **William L. Armstrong** (R-CO), elected to the Senate in **1978** (term through 1985), was identified with **evangelical** and **pro-Israel** positions—making **Israeli security** arguments salient.
4. **Lobbying environment.** The AWACS case drew **intense lobbying**: the administration and Gulf partners on one side; **AIPAC** and many pro-Israel lawmakers on the other.
5. **Strategic rationale.** The White House framed the sale as supporting **Gulf early-warning and air defense**, reinforcing U.S. **credibility with moderate Arabs**, and **not** altering Israel's **qualitative military edge (QME)**.
6. **Israel and AIM-9L.** The administration emphasized that Israel **possessed or was receiving** AIM-9L as part of ongoing cooperation—one of several assurances that Israel's **QME** would be maintained.
7. **Saudi security record.** By 1981 Saudi Arabia had operated **advanced U.S. systems** (e.g., **F-15s**) without diversion or compromise; Washington cited this record in arguing **risk controls** were effective.
8. **Safeguards/assurances.** The package included **U.S. participation in AWACS crews, basing and mission constraints, tamper-proof storage and release procedures** for sensitive munitions, and **data-handling protections**—plus parallel measures to bolster Israel's **QME**.
9. **Soviet parity claim.** U.S. intelligence assessed the **Warsaw Pact** was fielding or developing **all-aspect IR AAMs** (e.g., advanced **AA-8/AA-11** classes) and robust **GCI/air-defense networks**—undercutting arguments that AIM-9L transfer uniquely advantaged adversaries.
10. **Timing.** This meeting occurred **two days** before the decisive **Senate vote (Oct 28, 1981)** on the disapproval resolution, which failed **52–48**, allowing the sale to proceed.

11. **Max Friedersdorf.** Assistant to the President for **Legislative Affairs**, leading the **Senate whip** operation on AWACS.
12. **Senator Armstrong (R-CO).** A first-term Senator (formerly a House member), **undecided** but open to **assurances** arguments—viewed as a **potential flip** in the late-October count.



**Sen. Robert C. Byrd's remarks on the proposed AWACS sale
Senate floor**

October 21, 1981

Mr. President, in the words of one of my favorite poets, James Russell Lowell:¹

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide
in the strife of truth with falsehood
For the good or evil side.

Today, I am announcing my decision on the administration's proposed sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia.²

This has not been an easy decision for me, as I know it has not been an easy decision for many of my colleagues. For almost every argument I have heard for the sale I can offer an equally persuasive argument against the sale; and, conversely, for every argument against the sale, I can offer an equally convincing argument, at least in my viewpoint, for it.³

In other words, the terms of the debate as currently structured leave me unable to make a decision. For example, the argument is made that the Saudis are our friends in the region and we need to make good on a commitment to them. I think it is equally persuasive to argue that our being too close to the Saudis may not in the long run be in their best interests and, therefore, not in our own best interests.⁴

Therefore, I feel it is impossible to try to add up pros, add up the cons, and place them on a balance to see which weighs heavier.

I have met with officials of this administration—Secretary of State Alexander Haig; National Security Advisor Richard Allen; and Under Secretary of State James Buckley.⁵ I have talked with President Reagan privately in the Oval Office and by telephone, and I have had a brief discussion by telephone with former President Carter, who has addressed a letter to me on the subject, which I shall later insert in the Record.⁶ I have discussed the proposed sale with former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown; former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski; and former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger.⁷

I have listened to Senators on both sides of the aisle. I have been willing to listen to any Senator or anyone else who wishes to talk in this ear, any Senator or anyone else who wishes to talk in this other ear, but I have steadfastly refused to be "lobbied" by anybody.⁸

I have talked with numerous West Virginians, and read the letters from my constituents. Three former Presidents have expressed support for the AWACS sale, and certainly this support by three prior Presidents and their advisors must carry important weight for us.⁹

In my view, there is only one issue involved in a matter of this importance, and that is whether or not it will serve the interests of the United States.¹⁰

The overarching question which should guide our discussion is this: What is the best course for America to steer toward a lasting peace in the Middle East? That must be the top priority; for, without peace, other long-term goals in that region will never be achieved.¹¹

It is apparent at the outset that the proposed sale of sophisticated aircraft and associated equipment is but a subsidiary piece of what must be a broader policy determination by this Government. And it is precisely because a coherent policy framework for the United States in the Middle East has not yet been developed by this administration, that the decision on AWACS has been so difficult for me and many of my colleagues.¹² In deciding the merits of this relatively narrow question—the sale some 4 years hence of 5 AWACS aircraft as well as enhancements for fighter planes already agreed to—we have had to extend ourselves into presumptions, hypothetical scenarios, and guesswork about the sale's impact on the deeper currents running in the politics of the Middle East.¹³

These calculations unfortunately lack the perspective which a larger policy framework would lend to them. The crying need today is for action on the larger issues which are burning for resolution in that tragic region.¹⁴

From the outset, the issue of AWACS sales to Saudi Arabia unfortunately has been politicized, affording little opportunity to weigh the merits of the case. Issues peripheral to the debate have come to dominate the headlines, obscuring deep concerns that I, and many of my colleagues, have regarding the sale.¹⁵

For example, some have expressed concern that the AWACS technology could be used to give the Saudis a capability of offensive action against Israel. However, the administration has addressed this issue in some detail, and I am generally satisfied that the assurances we have received from the Saudis, as well as the continued close cooperation in the use and maintenance of the aircraft and our complete commitment to Israel's security, minimize this danger.¹⁶

The existence of a Saudi AWACS will not significantly alter the balance of air forces vis-à-vis the Israelis. Even if the Saudis were to attempt to use AWACS in a war against Israel, according to a staff study by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, they would probably not succeed, and the costs to the Saudis would be very high....¹⁷

I think it is important to underscore, forcefully, the following points. The vote on this issue is not a test of the United States–Saudi relationship, as some would have it, or a test of the United States–Israeli relationship, as others would have it. This is not a test between the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the United States as to who will call the shots in our foreign policy. These are peripheral issues which obscure and obfuscate the fundamental concerns which Congress must address in arriving at a decision on this matter.¹⁸

The real issue is that the Congress of the United States is being called upon to acquiesce in a major foreign policy decision impacting upon a vital, but highly volatile, region of the world. We are being called upon to make such a decision in the absence of a clearly defined or workable policy for the Middle East on the part of the administration.¹⁹

In attempting to arrive at a prudent decision on this matter, all we are given by the administration is some vague notion that it is important for the U.S. to forge a “strategic consensus” in that region. It is upon this fragile reed alone that the administration predicates its foreign policy in the Middle East. Somehow, in the absence of addressing directly the Arab–Israeli issues, the administration hopes to bring the adversaries in the region together in some loose strategic alliance to counter the Soviet Union and her proxies.²⁰

However, the Middle East peace process must be brought back to the forefront of our policy, and significant progress demonstrated for any strategic consensus on the Soviet threat to be viable....²¹

Mr. President, I have no idea what the administration is doing relative to the Middle East. In the absence of a coherent policy, the administration has reacted with a series of ad hoc and ill-conceived responses to events rooted primarily in the Arab–Israeli dispute and not the Soviet threat. As a consequence, these responses have been contradictory and have served to undermine our fundamental goal in the region—and that fundamental goal is the promotion of peace and stability....²²

The administration has expended most of its time and capital to date in attempting to build an anti-Soviet strategic consensus among our friends—including the Israelis, Egyptians, Saudis, the Gulf States, and Jordan. Yet, such a consensus would only be viable if the Arab–Israeli issues are resolved. If there is no progress in resolving them, it would seem impossible to develop such a regional consensus....²³

I am deeply concerned over the precedent that would be established by the proposed AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia. The assurances provided the Congress by the administration do not address these concerns adequately. We do not have a treaty relationship with Saudi Arabia. We do not have any defense arrangement with Saudi Arabia. Yet, the Saudis have rejected any suggestion that the United States will exercise joint command and control of the AWACS system.²⁴

If the Saudis are as concerned as is the United States in maintaining their security against external threats, then I think we have a right to determine what technology, if any, should be sold them and under what conditions that technology is to be transferred. It is a two-way street. The Saudis have an interest in having access to that technology for their own security; we have an interest in maintaining the integrity of our technology against compromise. Yet, the Saudis have dictated the terms of the sale.²⁵

Mr. President, there are other—and even greater—concerns relative to the technology involved in this sale. For example, the AIM-9L Sidewinder air-to-air missile is a highly advanced weapon that has not yet been developed by the Soviet Union. It gives our pilots a tremendous advantage because it allows them to fire missiles directly at hostile planes rather than requiring them to maneuver behind the enemy. The Sidewinder is a classified weapon. Saudi Arabia has not been given security clearance to receive the missile.²⁶

Since the AIM-9L is a classified technology, its sale should have been approved through the normal procedures established to safeguard its security and protect it from risks of compromise or misuse. Those procedures involve securing the approval of the National Disclosure Policy Committee (NDPC) prior to a sale's being finalized.... In the case of the proposed sale of the AIM-9L to Saudi Arabia, however, a deviation from the normal safeguard procedures was made and an exception to the national disclosure policy was granted. The committee was bypassed....²⁷

During Senate Armed Services Committee hearings on the proposed arms sale package for Saudi Arabia, Senator Levin questioned Secretary of Defense Weinberger as to why these procedures were not followed. The Secretary was unresponsive. Senator Levin then submitted additional questions to the Secretary for the record. He asked if the administration had consulted—as the NDPC does—the CIA's Counter-Intelligence Risk Assessment and the Security Survey Report which are prepared after an on-site investigation. To my understanding, Senator Levin has not yet received a reply to his questions....²⁸

Senator Levin stated that the Secretary of Defense, in one of the few responses given the Senator, indicated that the President himself decided to grant the exception to the national disclosure policy in the case of the sale of the AIM-9L. As a result, the Armed Forces were precluded from raising their concerns in the most appropriate and open forum available to them, the NDPC.²⁹

I now turn to the concern I have for the escalating arms race in the region. I am concerned that in light of the irresolution of the Palestinian issue, we will be precipitating another escalation in the arms race in the Middle East. Will we be faced with annual litmus tests? We hear that the Saudis “consider this as the litmus test.” Well, are we going to be faced with annual litmus tests on the part of the Saudis and the Israelis?³⁰

What will be the next test? More F-15s and F-16s for Israel to counter the perceived threat posed by the Saudis? In the case of the Saudis, will we be confronted in the coming years with an AWACS enhancement with top-of-the-line equipment to make jamming impossible—more missiles, planes and other armaments to deal with whom they perceive to be the primary threat in the region—Israel?³¹

As long as the Arab–Israeli dispute is pushed into the background, this sale does not make any sense. Rather than contributing to stability, I fear it will only raise the threshold of tension. I am concerned that we are fast approaching the point where we are handing over grenades to potential adversaries in the region with the pins already pulled.³²

As demonstrated by the raid on the Iraqi nuclear reactor, the Israelis have made it very clear that they will strike any perceived or potential threat to their security.³³ If the level of tension should reach a crisis point, such as direct armed conflict with Syria, I think any strategic planner would have to calculate that the Saudi Air Force and AWACS would be one of the first targets.³⁴

In the 1967 Middle East War, the Israelis conducted preemptive strikes on Arab airfields, destroying most of the Arab air forces on the ground. In 1973, they were caught completely by surprise and the cost was enormous. Therefore, preemptive strikes are at the heart of Israeli security policy today, and a Saudi Arabia in possession of AWACS would then be factored in as a threat when it has not been treated so by the Israelis in the past.³⁵

I am at a loss to understand how what began as a simple survey of Saudi defense requirements escalated into a major foreign policy issue for the United States, without a great deal of high-level attention along the way. We are putting our most sophisticated equipment into a highly volatile region. The fact that we face an adversary of the sophistication and might of the Soviet Union requires that we have for ourselves the best and most sophisticated equipment we can buy. This does not mean that we should transfer this equipment around the world without regard for the instability it can immediately produce, and the pressure for further escalation which almost certainly will result....³⁶

What is disturbing is that it appears we were locked into a question of providing AWACS to Saudi Arabia before the foreign policy implications were studied, or a workable Middle East policy formulated. In my estimation, the Pentagon may have overstepped its bounds.³⁷ It is one thing for our military to concentrate on meeting any threat posed by the Soviet Union, and certainly the potential threat to the Persian Gulf is something for which we should have significant concern.

However, it is quite another to expect our military planners to weigh very carefully the present and future foreign-policy consequences of such a decision—particularly in a region where traditional adversaries have been Arabs and Israelis, not primarily the Soviet Union....³⁸

I would now like to turn to my final area of concern. The administration reasons that once this package is approved, then we can begin focusing our attention on resolving the Arab–Israeli dispute. That is like putting the cart before the horse. As events this year in the Middle East have demonstrated, this is a very risky path. The track record has not been good on such intractable problems as the West Bank or the future status of Jerusalem.³⁹

My concern is what happens if the administration is wrong. What if there is no further progress on a comprehensive peace in the Middle East? Where will that leave Jordan, one of our closest allies in the Arab world for the past 25 years, whose King has given up on prospects for meaningful negotiations on the West Bank? Will more weapons be the answer as one country continues to play us, the United States, off against another? How will we then extricate ourselves from demands for more and more sophisticated weapons and yet preserve stability in the region? It is time for some creative thinking to take place as to how we get the peace talks back on track....⁴⁰

Approval of the sale will vault Saudi Arabia into the position of being America's chief client state in the Middle East. Transfer of technology, such as AWACS and the Sidewinder missile, is a strong signal that will provoke a strong response from radical Arabs. Saudi Arabia could easily become the major target of groups ranging from Libyan terrorists to Islamic fundamental extremists. These violent groups will perceive the Saudis as having sold out to "the Great Satan,"—America.⁴¹ The attack on the Great Mosque in Mecca at the time of the taking of the hostages in Iran demonstrates that Islamic fundamentalist movements exist not only in Iran and Egypt, but in Saudi Arabia as well. And the Libyans seem willing to go to great lengths to harm U.S. interests.⁴²

All of this reduces the contribution that the Saudis can be expected to make to the peace process in the Middle East. The primary component of the Saudi labor force—the people working in the oilfields—are Palestinians and other non-Saudis. Pressure from the bulk of the population on the Saudi royal family to refrain from close involvement in the peace process is very likely, in my opinion. Disruption of oil production could be swiftly accomplished by the Saudi workforce if it felt the royal family was becoming an American client. And the sale of the AWACS would create that impression....⁴³

By going to extremes to protect the oilfields from the external threat, which the administration says is the Soviet Union but which the Saudis say is Israel, the United States may help to precipitate internal instability. Egypt and Iran may be valid examples of this point. Iran was fantastically well-armed, but fell from internal strife. Egypt after Sadat may find it impossible to remain as close to the United States as we would like. I believe that the AWACS sale would push the Saudi population toward the radicals.⁴⁴

In my estimation, if the AWACS sale were to proceed at this time, the Saudis would lose, the Israelis would lose, the Egyptians would lose, the Jordanians would lose, and ultimately, the United States would lose....⁴⁵

And finally, I would like to address the issue of whether or not the President would be weakened in the conduct of foreign policy if this sale were to be rejected by the Congress. The Congress and the executive branch are coequal partners in the policy formulation of our Government. The framers of our Constitution constructed a system of checks and balances among the three branches. Constitutional scholars—including Arthur Bestor, Edward Corwin, Richard Neustadt, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Louis Henkin—maintain that under the Constitution the executive and legislative branches have “joint possession” of the power to decide questions of foreign policy. Under Section 36(b) of the Arms Export Control Act, signed into law by President Ford, the specific congressional role regarding arms transfers was outlined.⁴⁶

There are some who argue that the conduct of foreign policy is vested entirely in the President and that any matter, treaty, or national commitment should have the acquiescence of the Congress. In other words, Congress should be the rubber stamp and should follow any President blindly, dutifully, unquestioningly over a precipice. I would only point out that some who have made this argument opposed the Panama Canal Treaty and the SALT I and SALT II treaties after they had been negotiated by the executive branch.⁴⁷

These treaties were opposed on merit, however, by those who sincerely believed they did not promote the best interests of the United States.

I find this to be the case regarding the proposed arms sale to Saudi Arabia. I do not believe the sale serves the best interests of the United States. Quite to the contrary, I believe it places the best interests of the United States in jeopardy. Such a sale makes sense only within the context of a realistic Middle East policy which focuses on the fundamental issue separating Arabs and Israelis—the future of the Palestinians. If we do not recognize this, then we are launching on a path of upping the ante for Israel and the Saudis—escalating the arms race.⁴⁸

Mr. President, the arguments to vote for the sale are made for the wrong reasons. They turn mainly on the sphere of the Saudis’ reaction or on the President’s prestige.

Mr. President, I have listened to those arguments, I have weighed those arguments myself. There have been times when I felt I would be for the sale; there have been times when I felt I would be against it. As I said in the beginning, I think I could take the case and probably support it either way up to a point. But there comes a point when one has to say “yes” or “no” and not “maybe.”

So, having reached that point, and for the reasons I have stated, I feel very comfortable with the decision I have reached.

It is just this simple, really: If one, in consideration of the sale, goes back to square one, here is the question: Was this sale, as it is presently outlined, a prudent decision in the first place? I believe the answer would be a definite “no.”⁴⁹

Notes

1. **Lowell’s lines.** From James Russell Lowell’s 1845 poem “*The Present Crisis*,” frequently invoked in U.S. Senate oratory.
2. **What was at issue (timing).** Byrd spoke **one week before** the decisive Senate vote (Oct. 28, 1981) on a **joint resolution of disapproval** under **AECA §36(b)** to block the sale of **five E-3A AWACS** plus F-15 enhancements to Saudi Arabia. The resolution failed **48–52**, so the sale proceeded.
3. **Divided arguments.** Reflects the unusually **close whip count** and bipartisan divisions—many Senators publicly “undecided” into late October.
4. **Being ‘too close’ to Riyadh.** Byrd flags the dilemma that overt alignment with Saudi Arabia could **jeopardize** both Saudi internal stability and U.S. equities—an argument common among skeptics (cf. Turner, Byrd).
5. **Officials consulted.** Administration principals advancing the sale: **Haig (State), Allen (NSA), Buckley (Under Sec/State for Security Assistance).**
6. **Carter’s position.** Former President **Jimmy Carter** publicly **supported** the AWACS sale in 1981, alongside **Nixon** and **Ford**, despite his earlier 1978 F-15 assurances.
7. **Elder statesmen.** **Brown** (Carter’s SecDef) and **Schlesinger** (Nixon/Ford SecDef) supported the sale; **Brzezinski** (Carter’s NSA) also backed it—used by the White House to showcase **bipartisan** national-security support.
8. **Lobbying environment.** The fight featured intense, coordinated campaigns by both sides, notably **AIPAC** and pro-Israel coalitions, and a full-court administration push. Byrd stresses independence from direct lobbying.
9. **“Three former Presidents.”** **Nixon, Ford, and Carter** each issued statements favoring the sale, which Reagan highlighted to sway undecideds.
10. **Core standard.** Byrd frames his vote strictly by **U.S. national interest**, not as a litmus on U.S.–Saudi/U.S.–Israel ties.
11. **Peace first.** He insists **Arab–Israeli peace** be central—arguing hardware decisions absent diplomatic progress risk **instability**.
12. **Policy criticism.** Byrd faults Reagan for lacking a **coherent Middle East strategy**, beyond slogans, making this arms decision harder to assess.

13. **Delivery lag.** AWACS and most enhancements would arrive **mid-1980s**, forcing Senators to judge **future** risk/utility.
14. **“Larger issues.”** Shorthand for **Palestinian autonomy, settlements, Jerusalem, and Lebanon**—then-urgent but unresolved.
15. **Politicization.** Media narratives often personalized the fight (e.g., **Begin vs. Reagan**), overshadowing technical and strategic analyses.
16. **Assurances/safeguards.** References negotiated conditions: **U.S. crew presence, data-sharing, no third-party data transfer, defensive use/airspace limits, and facility/inspection security** (see Haig’s Oct. 1 testimony).
17. **SFRC staff study.** Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff analyses in Oct. 1981 argued that AWACS would be **vulnerable** in an Israel–Arab war and **unlikely** to change outcomes.
18. **Not a loyalty test.** Byrd rejects framing the vote as pro-Israel vs. pro-Saudi—or as a contest between **Begin** and **Reagan**.
19. **Congress’ role.** Under **AECA §36(b)**, Congress may **block** covered sales—Byrd underscores that this is a **policy** decision, not mere rubber-stamp.
20. **“Strategic consensus.”** Reagan/Haig concept to align **Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, GCC** against **Soviet** threats—Byrd argues it cannot substitute for tackling **Arab–Israeli** issues.
21. **Peace process linkage.** Byrd demands **visible progress** on **Camp David/autonomy** tracks as predicate for any broader security architecture.
22. **Ad hoc reactions.** He faults perceived **reactivity** (e.g., Lebanon, Gulf alarms) rather than integrated policy.
23. **Precondition for alignment.** Without movement on Arab–Israeli issues, a durable anti-Soviet bloc is **unlikely** to cohere.
24. **No treaty / C2 concerns.** The U.S. has **no defense treaty** with Saudi Arabia; Riyadh rejected **joint command and control** of AWACS, heightening Congressional anxiety over end-use/technology control.
25. **Terms of sale.** Byrd’s critique that Riyadh **“dictated”** terms reflects Senate skepticism over **operational sovereignty** vs. U.S. oversight.
26. **AIM-9L sensitivity.** The **all-aspect** Sidewinder provided a major qualitative boost; Byrd notes **Saudi clearance** issues and **classification** concerns.
27. **NDPC process.** The **National Disclosure Policy Committee** normally vets advanced tech transfers; Byrd alleges a **Presidential exception** bypassed the standard interagency review.
28. **Levin–Weinberger exchange.** Sen. Carl Levin pressed SecDef Weinberger on whether **CIA counterintelligence** and **security surveys** were consulted; Byrd notes **no response** at the time.

29. **Presidential exception.** Byrd says Weinberger indicated **Reagan** personally approved the **exception**—limiting formal dissent within the NDPC framework.
30. **“Litmus test” spiral.** Fear that each sale begets **counter-sales** (to Israel or Saudis), fueling an **arms race** absent political progress.
31. **Future enhancements.** Concern that AWACS would inevitably be paired with **upgrades** (ECCM, more missiles/aircraft), escalating capabilities.
32. **“Pins already pulled.”** Byrd’s metaphor for injecting advanced systems into a **tense** environment without political brakes.
33. **Reactor raid precedent. Operation Opera** (June 7, 1981): Israel’s strike on Iraq’s **Osirak** reactor—proof of **preventive** logic in Israeli planning.
34. **Target calculus.** In a Syria crisis, **Saudi AWACS** could be preemptively targeted by Israel to deny **situational awareness** to Arab forces.
35. **Preemption doctrine.** Israel’s **1967 preemption** and **1973 surprise** inform a doctrine that assumes **striking early** at high-value threats.
36. **Technology transfer caution.** Byrd echoes concerns that exporting **top-end** U.S. systems can **destabilize** and provoke **counter-measures**.
37. **Pentagon vs. policy.** His view that Defense momentum on **requirements** outpaced whole-of-government **foreign-policy** vetting.
38. **Primary adversaries lens.** Byrd warns that focusing on the **USSR** can obscure **local conflict dynamics** (Arab–Israeli) that actually drive crises.
39. **Cart before horse.** He argues peace diplomacy should **precede**, not **follow**, major arms transfers; cites **West Bank/Jerusalem** impasses.
40. **Jordan risk.** Worried that **King Hussein**—already wary—could disengage absent **credible** peace prospects, complicating U.S. strategy.
41. **Client-state backlash.** Fears AWACS signals **alignment**, inviting **terrorist/Islamist** targeting of Saudi Arabia as “**American client**.”
42. **Internal extremism precedents.** References **Mecca seizure (1979)** and **Libyan** activism to argue Saudi internal vulnerability.
43. **Labor force composition.** Large **expatriate** labor presence (incl. Palestinians) could complicate Saudi domestic politics and **oil stability**.
44. **Over-militarization risk.** Cites **Iran** (collapsed despite heavy armament) and **post-Sadat Egypt** uncertainty to caution against **externally focused** defense at expense of internal legitimacy.
45. **Net-loss judgment.** Byrd’s bottom line: the sale makes **everyone worse off** in the near term.

46. **Congressional authority.** AECA §36(b) gives Congress a **statutory veto** window on major sales; Byrd situates the vote within **constitutional shared powers** debates (Bestor, Corwin, Neustadt, Schlesinger, Henkin).
47. **Consistency point.** Critics who invoke presidential prerogative often **opposed** executive-negotiated treaties; Byrd claims **merit-based** evaluation is the standard.
48. **Palestinian core issue.** He argues the sale **without** addressing Palestinian self-determination risks **arms escalation** and **strategic drift**.
49. **Decision.** Byrd announced opposition to the sale; the Senate nevertheless failed to block it **a week later** (52–48 against disapproval).



Reagan news conference after the Senate vote.