

David Pryor

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I said I wanted a post-mortem on AWACS. "Sort of like an exit poll" he called it ~~at~~ The end.

I asked how he got committed so early. He reached for a tattered notebook in cubbyhole of his old antique desk. "When I travel I take notes--like a diary--and someday I'll compile them. I went to the Middle East around Easter and I came away with a strong impression of Saudi reluctance to share information with us. Here--(he shows me his notes) 'will Saudis share information with allies'--with a big question mark. Here (again pointing) 'Saudis regard shared crews as a dagger in the heart.' The Saudis, I thought, were very suspicious and not very willing to cooperate. Furthermore, I do not believe we should spread our arms all over the world, giving other countries our best technology. That bothers me. I even thought of Ronald Reagan out on the rubber chicken-green pea circuit all those years saying we ought not to give away our technological advantages, that we ought not to give away our arms and so forth.

Not long after my trip, someone in Little Rock asked me what I thought about the sale of AWACS. I said I was against it. I don't want to say I hadn't thought about; but I don't want to say I had thought it all the way through either. But the more I repeated it, the more I became comfortable with the position. I was one of the six original signers of the Packwood letter asking the President not to send the sale to the Senate. I thought that since I had declared a position on the issue, I would become very conspicuous if I did not become a part of the Packwood group. I felt that since I was in at the beginning, I should be prepared to stay till the end.

I can't say I didn't have second thoughts about it. I'm not anti-Saudi. I never had that feeling that Packwood had. I'm not sure why I committed so early. But once I did, I stayed to the end."

I asked re pressure. "When I first took a position on it in Little Rock, there was a good bit¹¹⁾ of media interest. The very small Jewish community in Arkansas and a few others wrote and said, 'We appreciate what you did.' But no one was interested in AWACS then. The media had not got hold of it. For two or three months I was on solid ground. Those people who thought about it were against it. I was looking at a poll last night that showed that the people who knew about it opposed the sale two to one in the early fall. Then, in the last ten days--whoosh--the pendulum swung. I was subjected to tremendous pressure. Pressure from the people who sell ~~rice~~ ^{oil} to the Saudis, people who sell equipment to the Saudis, oil people--the President of Mobil Oil sat right over there. The assistant secretary of state came in--two visits with the President. I was probably the last person he saw. They must have thought they saw a soft under~~balling~~^{belly}--that they would say 'Dave you've just got to support the President.' One of the deficits a politician can get is to be known as a flipflop. So I said to myself 'I'll just have to ride this one out.' I heard from one of my friends back home who was at a fish fry and he said people are mad at me. But they'll forget. This is not an issue like the Panama Canal--it's ours, we paid for it, don't give it away. It was a very emotional issue, but it's not one where people's patriotism gets questioned. I shed no tears when we lost. One good result has come out of it--that the awesome, unlimited, unchecked power of the President to make arms sales will never be the same again. This vote says that Congress will not permit it, ever again."

Re meeting with President. "We sat in his upstairs study. And before he had a chance to speak, I spoke up. I said 'Mr. President, Powell Moore and Max Friedersdorf have been very professional with me, but I wish they had brought you someone less hard headed than I am on this issue.' I suppose that was

not polite--I ran the meeting. I told him that I would shed no tears if he won, but that I could not change.' I also told him that I hoped the unlimited power of the President to sell arms would be checked in the future. They probably thought they saw some vulnerability in me that they didn't see in others. Jim Sasser never got one call; Dale Bumpers got one 1-hour call from someone. The issue became one of 'Are you for or against the President? The substance of the issue was lost sight of. On the substance I feel that my position was the right one. I'm comfortable with it. It fits in with the anti-arms position I'm taking now. The arms business scares me to death."

Told me about an amendment he's trying to get in to stop corps from digging channel near Camden till they study it more.

He didn't seem to want to end the interview. "Let's see what else I'm doing." But I left so as not to use up my credits. "Well get you out to the house sometime so we can meet your wife." I had begun by thanking him for his invitation to his party last weekend--we had to go to Rochester.