

P2 - cancer prospects - Tan
(Daffron)
Bill Cohen

November 9, 1981

We met accidentally in AM. I said I wanted to talk about AWACS and had a PM appointment. His shoulders slumped as if to say 'no', then he said he'd do it. So I'll go back. He said "The fallout from that is pretty interesting." I said "I saw your speech and it was very moving". He said, "I moved myself, I think."

Then he said "That was the way it had to go. Russell Long wouldn't say what he would do. I was the only one they could count on." Then he said, "It's best for Israel" said he could picture what would happen if he didn't vote that way. British would get involved.

I had lunch with Tom Daffron--he said they had sent out 1200 letters on AWACS--350-400 do Maine and rest to elsewhere. He said Maine mail was running 50-50 and elsewhere 70-30 against Bill." Said among Jews in Maine, however, most of them disagree with Bill. He met with some of the leaders of Jewish community on Saturday before the vote. He says that he thinks they will not hold one vote against Bill, since "he has supported Israel 100% ever since he was elected to the House."

"He's independent. Those people who say he caved in to the President don't know their history. They don't remember Watergate. He's independent of presidents, interest groups, and administrations. That's his strength. I'm happy when he's between 40 and 60 on all interest group rankings."

He also described Bill. "He's a Senator in between the nuts and bolts Senator who sticks to one subject--a person like Bill Bradley who does his work, keeps his nose to the grindstone and is a good inside Senator who doesn't speak very well--and a Bobby Kennedy who used the Senate as a mail drop and who tried to move the issues with the strength of his oratory. Bill used to be more of the external Senator. But now he's gotten interested in some legislative matters and he's been in on some inside deals. He's learned that

if you ask for something, you've got to give something. Nothing is free here. He's also found that it's good to stay uncommitted once in a while, so people don't take you for granted. But he's got good relations with all the big people here. The Howard Baker's of the world call him as much as he calls them."

"The neophyte period is over. We spent the first two years proving that he could do hard work and could get along with the John Towers and the Howard Bakers of the world. We also wanted to prove to the people of Maine that he was still the same old Bill he always was, that the Senate hadn't gone to his head. That he's still interested in the Social Security check and the EDA grant for the potatoe processing plant. (How?) We have 5 offices in the state and we go to every citizen's meeting everywhere in the state. And we crank Bill in where necessary, to call a Cabinet Secretary. When he goes back we make sure he doesn't spend all his time discussing SALT, but talks about Maine's problems. I'd rather protect that flank than anything else. If I have a chance between getting him 2 more inches in the N.Y. Times or protecting him from a problem in Maine, I'll protect him everytime. So many of the people in the office have been around so long that they won't let him stray from his constituents. For the next couple of years and a half things have been dictated by the control of the Senate. Bill will have a little more opportunity to accomplish a few things. People expect more of him too. He can even develop a little leadership. And we will try selectively, for a little national exposure on certain issues. For the last year and a half, we'll just worry about reelection. In the fifth year, we'll try to scare off any opponent and the sixth year we'll just run. If we survive that we'll be nearly invincible and then be in a position to really take off on a Senate career."

Said Bill was "very competitive." I'll put him in situation where I know he does not want to be, and trust that his competitiveness will get him out. And it does. He's competitive and smart. It gives me freedom to act. He'll be made for a while and later realize that it was beneficial for him."

Said Bill still likes the Senate and spoke again of "Bill's low threshold of boredom."

He talked, in what context I can't recall, about "damage control operation" in which "you don't want to spend all your chips" with the administration. Calculating how often you can go against them. He took view that you go with the party unless there's some important reason not to. That's a "damage control strategy."

I talked with Bill about AWACS. "When it came up last spring, I signed the Packwood Resolution asking the President not to bring the sale up. 51 or 53 of us signed it. I thought it was a bad idea. And the Administration did not seem prepared to push it. It was right after the attempted assassination and the administration was only dealing with one thing at a time. That seemed to be their way of operating anyway, so there seemed no likelihood that would come up soon. All of our interests were being served. I gave several speeches against the sale arguing that on balance Israel would be damaged but also saying I thought Israel would be hurt no matter which way the deal went. It was a bad deal in part for just that reason--either way Israel would suffer."

"When the administration decided in July to send the deal up to Congress, that changed things for me. At least I felt I ought to take a more thorough look at it. The more I looked at it the more I began to worry about what the situation would look like if the deal did not go through--the Saudis with their hurt pride, the British in there selling the Saudis weapons, Israel

asking us for arms to control the Saudies, Israel blamed for the defeat, the peace process in trouble, David Stockman saying we can't offer any help to Israel, besides they have only themselves to blame, and a president who had had his wings clipped in his first foreign policy effort. As bad as the sale was for Israel, I began to think the defeat of the sale might be worse. I left signs along the way that my thinking was changing. But I had not decided to vote for the sale."

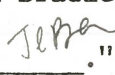
"Then about two and a half weeks ago, I got involved when someone tied in very closely to the Israeli intelligence network (when are you going to write this?) called me and said despite the official Israeli opinion, there were some serious doubts in Israel about the sale. There was real worry about the British Mimrod and the Saudi build up of the sale was rejected. The Jewish lobby was not necessarily reflecting the true Israeli position. I began to look more seriously at what would happen if the sale went through. So I called the Israeli Ambassador and asked him to come talk to me. He sat right where you are sitting. I put to him what I considered the key question: What would it take to make Israel secure? He reached in his pocket and pulled out a list of things. I knew I couldn't get a commitment out of the President--he won't negotiate with Billy Cohen. But I asked for a meeting with the President and told him of my concern for Israeli security and my idea of what it would take to make Israel secure. He told me that he would make absolutely certain that Israel did not lose its military advantage. I told him I wanted him to succeed; but I also told him I did not know how I was going to vote. I also talked to Jim Baker about it and received similar assurances about Israeli security. I thought about it some more, and the more I thought about it the more I thought the sale was the right position. But I still wasn't satisfied, so I asked for another meeting with the President, my third, and got that one last commitment. I

suppose I could say he was lying, that he wasn't serious, but I trusted him and I believed him. I stayed up all night before the vote writing a pro AWACS speech. But I still was not certain how I would vote. If I voted for the sale, I would give the speech. If I voted against I would just go out and say I was voting against it and not give any speech. A little after noon I went to Howard Baker and asked him what his count was. He said 49. I said what about Russell Long. He said, he won't talk to anyone. I said how about Kasten? He said we can't get to him. But he said to me 'You and I are friends and we'll be friends no matter how you vote on this. He said Bill, the political thing to do would be to wait till the end, see how things are going and cast your vote then. Howard, I'm not going to wait. I'm going to decide and I'm going to announce soon. I said I've got to have more time to think. Honestly, up until 10 minutes before I gave my speech I wasn't certain what I was going to do. I finally decided that if I looked back three or four years from now I didn't want to feel that I had caved in to the pressure for being consistent. I decided the pro AWACS vote was the right vote. Once I decided I went back and said 'Howard I need time.' That was the signal to him. He went out on the floor, came back and said you have 12 minutes. I said 'I'll need more time than that to explain this vote.' He went back onto the floor again, came back and said OK you've got 20 minutes."

"After my speech I left quickly to go to the press galleries because Bob Tysen^{for} had slipped me a note that WGAN in Portland needed a quick story so that it could get back to Maine in time. I thought the Maine people should know the reasons behind my decision, so I rushed up. It was the first time I had ever been in the Senate press gallery. When I got there, they had the whole national media waiting for me. It was a complete surprise to me. I answered questions for 40 minutes. I remember being completely dehydrated, my mouth was like dry leaves. But the TV part went OK. Then they said 'Now you've got to go over

and talk to the print media.' That was like throwing a piece of lamb to the wolves. They ~~for me~~ apart. They were angry at me for what I had done. They didn't want to hear my reasons; they wanted to attack me. The lady from Time Magazine set right in front of me shaking her head and pounding her fist and saying 'No, No' to everything I said. One guy over here would yell something and before I got a chance to answer, someone else would yell another question. 'Why did you take 15 minutes to speak against the sale and only five minutes to say why you were voting for it?' 'To show you the thought process I went through--6 months of thinking collapsed into 20 minutes.' I wanted them to know it takes a mind to change it. But no one buttressed my arguments. Then, 'why are you worried about anti-Semitism?' "I'm not talking about anti-Semitism, I'm talking only about anti-Israelism, and there's a big difference." But all the stories mentioned anti-Semitism and there isn't one word in the speech but anti-Semitism. For an hour I was riddled with machine gun fire. I think they wanted Reagan to lose, to get his and he hadn't. They had predicted he would lose; and they were holding me responsible for his victory.

I never went through anything like it. Tom Pettit, whom I think is just about as cynical as anyone in the news business, asked me to do a half hour interview for later that night. He used six minutes of the tape--which is a long time to give one person. So at least one cynic gave me the time to explain my vote. Most of them didn't want to listen."

He said someone told him that "Bob Kaiser, who will become managing editor of the Washington Post--Ben Bradlee's position--said after my speech that 'We'll get Cohen just like we got Seba.'" 

"The press treatment was a terrible disappointment. Time Magazine printed a story saying I went down to the dining room and laughed with the other Senator about how much I had gotten out of the deal. I never even went

to the dining room. When I asked the Time reporter where that story came from, she said 'it was a rumor floating around.' I said 'Wouldn't it have been nice to check with me before you print a rumor.' The other stories called me 'weak' and 'shallow' and said I 'caved in'. William Safire called it a 'flip flop'. Mary McGrory said 'Cohen explained miserably'... Steve Roberts of the NY Times came up and said 'I'll bet Loring Air Force Base will stay open now. I said 'Yes it will, because I'm on the Armed Services Committee.' Then he said "I'll bet Bath Iron Works will get more ships 'I said yes, they'll get six frigates instead of three, but that's already in the bill--long before this vote. Then he said, 'Well you must have gotten plenty for that vote.' I said 'I got nothing but a promise to keep Israel's military advantage, which is all I wanted.' But there is no way I could make him believe that. And they'll never quit. Once they tag you with the lable "caved-in" there's nothing you can do to get rid of it--not for a long time. If I had voted against the sale I would have caved in to the pressure for consistency. Sometimes changing your mind requires more courage than not changing it. But the press doesn't see that."

They wanted Reagan to lose. They have their biases--which I don't mind. What I mind is when they wrap themselves in a mantle of objectivity. I suppose that's what Spiro Agnew said too. Maybe I had it coming ever since I wrote Roll Call. They love to cut down anyone they think is a man on the make." I said that if he wasn't running for president, he certainly would not have acted so rile up the Jews so much. "I'm not running for President," he snapped. And he agreed with me that if he were thinking politically, strategically, he would have voted against AWACS.

"When I went through the door into the Senate, a guy from AIPAC grabbed me and said 'We've got to talk. We hear you are shakey on AWACS. I was furious to hear him call me shakey. I said 'I've been thinking about it, if that's what you mean.' I asked him to get out of my way, but he physically blocked the door. I said if you don't get out of the way, I'll push you

out of the way.' I'd have to go back to my college days to recall seeing that kind of physical confrontation with someone. He pissed me off."

Another Jewish leader tracked him down that noon in Towers office where he had gone for a quiet lunch and he talked with him (the other guy being in Bill's office)" "He was nearly hysterical over the phone. When I told him what I was thinking, he would say no, no to each of my arguments. The more vehement he got with his arguments, the more I knew I was doing the right thing. I took so much time talking to him that I missed my lunch."

"I tell you frankly that some of the letters I have gotten since the vote are as fascistic as anything I've ever seen--Judas, twenty pieces of silver, traitor. (He told story of asshole letter in which guy named Cohen writes "You are an asshole. You are an embarrassment. Please change your name." Wrote back "I don't ordinarily indulge the idiosyncracies of letter-writers, but I shall make an exception on your case,' and I signed it Joseph Cohen.' That made him feel better, I guess.)

"I have one problem resulting from all this and it's my problem. What do you do when a Dear Colleague letter comes around. Do you sign it? If you do, will people say that your signature doesn't mean anything? I have a credibility problem around here right now and my reaction is not to sign anything. No resolutions. Those damn things that get you committed. It's like being in a hall of mirrors. You don't know what you can do, with credibility. So I'm signing nothing. But that will change sometime, I'm sure."

"My argument that Israel would be less secure if AWACS was blocked is a subtle argument. But it's even more subtle than that. If the sale was going through and I could be the 50th vote, then I could have more leverage

with the administration and be in a better position to help Israel get what it needs to remain secure. I didn't want Russell Long to be the 50th vote. Another oil state Senator calling in his chips is something we don't need--off the record." It seems clear that his place in the pivot was important to his thinking.

He said several times "I knew what the reaction would be. I knew what the consequences would be." I think he meant among the Jews.

Said he went to Portland to talk to a group of 12-13. "So I _____ my one strong supporter in Portland asked if I would come if he set up a meeting with 10-15 leaders of the Jewish community. I said certainly. They were supposed to be my friends, my strongest supporters, my best fund raisers. But they were very hostile and in that situation you learn who your friends are. I said to them you remind me of the saying that 'People you support never remember and people who disagree with you never forget.' I tried to explain my position but they were not satisfied. They sat there with their arms folded. They were so pious about 'having to have a foreign policy' that I asked them what policy they wanted. They were silent. Then someone said we should not be dependent on Persian Gulf Oil. I asked them what about Japan? I played devil's advocate and said that Israel should want us interested in Persian oil so we will be interested in the area. Americans feel no moral obligation to Israel I said. They aren't going to defend Israel because of the holocaust. Some of them said they hadn't thought of it that way. But it's such an emotional issue. I hate to lose Jewish support. Their support is intense. They are the best people in the community. I have been asked to speak at every ADL in the country--hundreds of them. No more!"

Spoke of conversation he had night before the vote with Mr. Kagan, President of Penobscot Shoe Company--whose letter of support Bill showed me. "He

is an original Cohen supporter and a strong one--the only one now in Bangor. The night before the vote I called him and told him what I was thinking. He was upset and he said 'it's a very emotional issue for me.' I told him it was a very emotional issue for me, too. The easy vote, I said, would be to vote against the sale. But the easy vote might not be the right vote. I explained why I thought the vote for the sale was the right vote--the hard vote, but the right vote. When I finished, he said "You've convinced me. I'll go as far as you want with you, Bill." That made the vote a lot easier, I must say. But the rest of the Jewish community in Bangor are terrible. I'm going back there this weekend to talk to some more. I'm not hiding. I'm going back to explain."

Said Bangor Daily News cartoon showed him coming out of Oval Office "with arm twisted and wallet bulging." Said Joe Day - BDN columnist who writes 40 out of 50 columns negatively about me." wrote an insightful one called family politics--asking why all press treatment dwelled on his Jewish father and neglected his Irish mother. "I got what independence I have from my mother."

Harry Truman said "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." I guess that's right.

"You get to the point, I think I have, where you say that the only good part of the job is that you have a chance to do what's right. So you do what you think is right and say 'screw it.' Not publicly of course. But there are other jobs; and as you know, I'm not all that enamored of this one."

"Nobody in the Senate lobbied me. When the White House called John Tower, he told them to stay away from me. Howard Baker never lobbied me, never asked me for my vote."

When he talked about not wanting to look back on the wrong vote, he said

he succumbed to Greek pressure on first Turkish arms embargo vote. "It was the wrong vote. The next time around I voted to give the Turks a chance. And I told my constituents that my first vote was wrong."

Someone asked him what effect it would have on relations with colleagues. "With Republicans, it doesn't matter. With Democrats there are only a few I care about and they understand... Henry Jackson hasn't looked my way. I regret that because I like him. That's why I signed his minority views on the Armed Services Committee I wanted to give him a Republican vote so his position would not seem so partisan."

"I got a commitment from the President on Israeli arms. But I learned one thing. They don't deal with you unless they need you."

Baker and Tower may go to Israel--he's using his leverage to get them to go.

Couldn't tell what he knew re Israel intelligence views

Bill Cohen Clippings

B Globe story by Benjamin Taylor and Denise Goodman. "Cohen's AWACS Switch." 10/31.

Cranstown aide. "He made a rather involuted argument, but it was also perceptive in one sense. It was almost a traditional Jewish approach that dates back centuries based on the idea that Jews should keep a low profile so as not to arouse gentile animosity."

Glenn aide. "Of all the people that caved in to the President, Cohen had at least thought about it long enough to come up with a logical way out. And that was that the consequences for Israel would be worse if the sale were blocked than if it went ahead." Jepsen worse

Maine Democratic Chairman said the vote was "typical of the waffling and wavering that he's demonstrated in his nine years in Washington."

Some: "hurt and disappointment from Maine Jewish leaders.

Presque Isle Herald 11/4/81. "We feel Cohen came to difficult decision by thoughtful means, knowing he'd get a face full of flack with no certainty of local political reward."

Ft. Fairfield Review. "Cohen is one gutsy Senator."

Bangor Daily News. "Cohen's Choice" 11/2. "Sen. Cohen's record as a public man, going back to his impeachment vote during the Watergate era is hardly a trail of capitulation or moral flaccidity. Given the complexity of the issue and the Maine Senator's incisive understanding of Middle East Affairs, even his detractors owe him the benefit of the doubt on this one."

BDN 11/2. Kent Ward (Ass't Manag. Editor). "Cohen to the surprise of many but not this old dawg, changed his mind on the issue at the last minute and voted for the sale, protesting all the way to the television cameras in time for the 6 o'clock news."

It will enhance Cohen's career he says - but no specifics except that Cohen is smart, savvy and lucky.

"I would never claim to be--nor would I want to be for that matter--a political scientist because, for starters, I have never known just what it is that a political scientist does for work."

John Day article in BDN 10/31. Says 600 letters are in, 322 differ with Cohen, 260 approve. Examples he cites "Hall Judas...How does it feel to betray your father's people. You belong with all the little gray men, evil and corrupt."

"You sir are everything the word obscene stands for."

Supporting editorials from Portland Press Herald, Kennebec Journal, Ft. Fairfield Review, Presque Isle Star Herald, Ellsworth America.

Bob Tyser says there was a lot of support from press - not that interested in AWACS and no group other than Jews who were against the sale. Not a big

Maine issue-- all other delegations went against on grounds that only Jews cared.