

# The AWACS Debate Turns Ugly

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

The debate over the wisdom of providing Saudi Arabia with sophisticated surveillance aircraft, the AWACS, and other enhanced equipment for the F-15 fighter is now under way in Washington. It is the most critical foreign-policy decision before Congress and the first test of the Reagan Administration in this area.

Ultimately, the outcome will reflect Congress' judgment of whether this proposed arms sale is in the national interest of the United States—not whether it is in Saudi Arabia's interest or Israel's. This is the proper basis for deciding the argument, and the one that members of the House and Senate are carefully weighing.

What troubles me are indications that the debate has begun to turn ugly. Some supporters of the sale have already accused opponents of being manipulated by, even acting as the de facto agents of, Israel and the "Israeli lobby"—of allegedly obstructing American foreign policy at the behest of a foreign power or because of improper political influence. Some examples:

—Sen. Robert Packwood (R-Ore.) sponsored the resolution to disapprove the arms sale in the Senate, and was joined by 49 co-sponsors. President Reagan met privately with him to discuss it. Afterward, a report circulated from the White House that one factor in the senator's position was his desire not to alienate Jewish contributors to the Republican Party. Packwood, privately furious over the allegation, issued a stringent denial. But the White House has refused to repudiate the report, permitting its ugly connotations to linger.

—Sen. John Tower (R-Tex.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, is a lead-

ing supporter of the AWACS deal. He has questioned the very integrity of the opposition in the Senate. "I am appalled that so many of my colleagues have subordinated the national interest and the cause of peace in the Middle East to domestic political considerations," he said. Such a remark, with its thinly veiled reference to Jewish voters, denigrates the legitimacy of attempts by common citizens to express their views on foreign policy—and of their representatives to respond to such sentiments as they see fit. The senator seems to forget that the right to petition the government is a pillar of a democratic society.

—Frederick Dutton is Saudi Arabia's hired lobbyist on AWACS. He demands that senators opposing the sale explain "how they will run foreign policy now that they have chosen Begin over Reagan," implying that some senators hold the interests of Israel over those of the United States. That is an insulting and ludicrous proposition.

—Max Friedersdorf is the President's chief lobbyist on Capitol Hill. In providing materials to document the Administration's arguments for AWACS, he included an essay that appeared in Time magazine. It labeled Israel "not just a dubious asset but an outright liability to American security interests." While this material was being circulated, American and Israeli leaders were proclaiming a new strategic alliance. "It is high time" the essay concluded, for the United States to engage Israel in a debate over the fundamental nature of their relationship. If that means interfering in Israeli politics, then so be it." Members of Congress cannot help but wonder, after reading this article courtesy of the White House, wheth-

er the Administration in fact endorses such views—and if so, why.

These are disturbing instances which have persisted to form a definite pattern. They contain the potential to profoundly alter the nature of the AWACS debate. They all raise questions over the legitimacy of conclusions that differ from those reached by President Reagan. But they go beyond honest argument by raising questions over the motives, integrity and intentions of the opposition. In fact, many of the strongest opponents of AWACS, such as Sen. Roger Jepsen (R-Iowa) and Sen. Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyo.), have a minuscule number of Jewish voters in their constituencies.

For the growing majority of opponents in the Senate, the overriding concern is that the transfer of such sophisticated technology to so unstable a country is simply not in the national security interests of the United States.

To suggest that sinister or improper influences govern the actions of those who cannot in good conscience support AWACS is as absurd—and dangerous—as to claim that candidate Reagan was similarly motivated when he urged that the Senate reject the Panama Canal and SALT treaties. Such arguments serve only to tear apart our political fabric, devalue the political process and demean legitimate differences over policy. All involved in this debate must appreciate that what is at stake is not only AWACS for the Saudis, but also our democratic values at home.

*Henry A. Waxman is a Democrat who represents the 24th Congressional District (West Los Angeles).*