

Myer Feldman Oral History Interview –JFK#11, 7/29/1967
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Biographical Note

Feldman, (1914 - 2007); Legislative assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy (1958-1961); Deputy Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964); Counsel to the President (1964-1965), discusses recognizing Yemen, the Jordan River dispute, and selling Hawk missiles to the Israelis, among other issues.

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Eleventh Oral History Interview

with

MYER FELDMAN

July 29, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don't we start by my just asking you if you recall how you first got involved in the whole Yemen incident, the dispute which started in September of '62 when the Imam [Muhammad al-Badr] died. The big question I guess originally was when and how to recognize the new government. There was some dispute within the Administration I think on this.

FELDMAN: That's correct, that's correct. I first heard about it when Bob Komer [Robert W. Komer] called me and said the President wanted to see me. Bob and I went in to see the President. The President described very briefly what was happening in Yemen and wanted to know just what I

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thought about how Israel would be affected by the recognition by the United States of the republican government of Yemen, by the non-recognition of the republican government, what the American Jewish community would think of actions by the United States in either one of these two directions and finally, just what did I think about the thing. Bob Komer had very, very strong viewpoints. Bob Komer told the President that he thought it was important that we recognize Yemen immediately. I asked him about Great Britain. I said, "Why should we be the first, why shouldn't we wait until Great Britain did it?" The President sat there and listened while Bob Komer and I discussed it. Bob said that he thought if we

recognized the republican government of Yemen that would give us what he called some clout with Nasser [Gamal Abdel Nasser] and that we could get Nasser to come along in our direction and perhaps be a little more amenable to suggestions that we would make if we did this as a favor to him. I

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confess I doubted that and I told the President that I really wasn't familiar enough with that area of the world or with reactions the Israeli government might have to express any firm opinion, but it would seem to me that if we did it hastily we ran a great many risks. We ran the risk of being all by ourselves in recognizing Yemen and thus supporting a government that perhaps didn't represent the people, and that there wasn't really any need for haste. We could sit back for a few weeks and see how this government develops; see whether or not the government truly represented the people or not. I thought that Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] was impressed by that argument, and he was somewhat reluctant to accept Bob's advice to do it immediately. In fact as I remember he called Dean Rusk and talked to Dean Rusk on the telephone after our conversation, but while we were still in the room. Well, I didn't hear what Dean Rusk said and I don't remember what Kennedy said. But after he hung up I do remember he said that he

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thought that the prevailing view in the State Department was in support of what Komer was saying. I do remember that as I left that meeting I said, "Well, if we do recognize Yemen, one, we should get very firm guarantees from Nasser as to what he would do."

STEWART: As far as Jordan and Saudi Arabia was concerned, particularly.

FELDMAN: Yes, that's right, that's right. "Two, that I felt we ought to watch it very carefully and perhaps adjust our attitude toward Yemen as time went on." All that happened really without any notice to me. So I went to inquire after that meeting and to various people that I usually consulted to find out what they thought about it. And those I talked to – shall I tell you who I talked to? Maybe I better not.

STEWART: Yes, go ahead.

FELDMAN: I better not.

STEWART: These will all be closed.

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FELDMAN: Yes, well, I talked to the Israeli Embassy among others. I talked to a friend of mine in New York and asked him to talk to the Jewish community, a fellow named Feinberg [Abraham Feinberg]. I talked to several other people in New York City, and they more or less confirmed my feelings, but they said that what we ought to get from Nasser was a commitment with respect to Israel, that if we could, in return for recognizing a nation, in which he was interested, get him to either cut down on propaganda broadcasts to the Arab refugees or reduce some of the vilification that was heard on his radio, or do something which would indicate that he was giving something to us in return for what we were giving him, that this would be better. I reported that to Kennedy, but even by then it was too late. He'd already recognized Yemen. It happened very quickly I remember, I'm not quite sure what the date...But right after the meeting, even before I had a chance to report back to him, he told me that Yemen was being recognized and that Komer certainly felt that Nasser would be amenable to some gestures in the direction of the

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West as a result of this.

STEWART: The Pentagon had been quite opposed to recognition, I think, because of the whole connection with Aden.

FELDMAN: Yes, that's right, that's right. A Security Council meeting was held on it. I did not attend that meeting of the Security Council, and I understood that that's what the Department of Defense position was. After that whenever I'd refer to this I used to kid Komer in talking to the President. We used to call this, the Yemen War, "Komer's War" because I guess, more than any other person he was responsible for the quick action in recognizing Yemen, for the position we took, and therefore, I guess, perhaps for the support, for some support for Nasser that made this war continue to today. I still think now that it was a mistake.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in the mission that Ellsworth Bunker eventually took?

FELDMAN: I was told about it, yes. I was told about it. It was mentioned briefly at a breakfast, you know, our

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usual breakfast we used to have with Kennedy. I didn't have any particular reaction to the mission except to feel that at least this was an effort to resolve some of the problems, getting Nasser to withdraw some of his troops. I think our efforts from then on started to take the form of trying to get Nasser to reduce the troops, but every time we got a report it seemed to me that he was putting more troops in there. I do think that Yemen had this effect on Kennedy. It emphasized to him a feeling that he had before that, that Nasser

was completely untrustworthy. We did get constant assurances from Nasser or from people representing Nasser to the effect that if so and so was done, he would reduce his commitment to Yemen, or "Just wait another thirty days and I'll let the Yemenis rule themselves. I won't support them." He continued that and it wasn't long before Kennedy just felt that what Nasser was saying bore no relationship to what he was thinking. So the Yemen incident did serve the function of alerting Kennedy

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to the credibility of Nasser, not that he believed him before, but he knew from then on that there just was no basis for believing anything he said. The State Department used to say that, "Oh, Nasser's going to do this. Don't pay any attention to what he's saying publicly. He really is going to reduce his troop commitments," or, "He really does want peace," or, "He's just making these noises toward Saudi Arabia and toward Israel and toward other nations because that's good politics in Egypt." And the State Department people would say that his real feelings were quite different and that they knew what his real feelings were. Well, the complete lack of honesty perhaps in what Nasser said during the Yemen discussions, I think, convinced Kennedy that he'd just have to judge Nasser on the basis of actions and not on the basis of what somebody was telling him Nasser really thought. So, it did serve some of that purpose.

STEWART: Well, of course this went right into 1963 and there probably isn't much after that as far as Kennedy's

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concerned...

FELDMAN: No, no, we used to raise the Yemen, we used to discuss Yemen fairly often, not that there was anything we could do about it. Once we had recognized them there was nothing we could do. The British were upset, I remember, when we did it. We'd discuss it occasionally just to see whether there was something that could be done to reverse this hasty action. I had the impression that if Kennedy had had it to do over again he would not have recognized Yemen, but he was convinced to do so by the arguments of State and Bob Komer. So it wouldn't be right to say that we did it and then we forgot about it, but even though we remembered it and discussed it from then on there wasn't much more we could do about it. We couldn't withdraw recognition, there wasn't any excuse for that.

STEWART: Well, is there anything else as far as Yemen is concerned that you...

FELDMAN: I don't think there's much else we can say about Yemen; it was just a mistake and ultimately recognized as a mistake, but one that you can't correct. Kennedy, I remember, used to say that foreign policy is much

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more important than domestic policy because when you make a mistake and direct domestic policy it can always be corrected. But when you make a mistake in foreign policy it's usually impossible to correct it. I think Yemen is a pretty good illustration of that.

STEWART: Charlie Bartlett in his book says that Komer pretty much took this over because there was a fear of getting involved militarily and the President felt that the White House should have almost total control of the situation.

FELDMAN: I'm not sure that's the reason so much as there was a vacuum in the State Department so far as Yemen was concerned. They didn't have anybody that was a specialist in Yemen. And the people that dealt with it weren't familiar with the wide ramifications, that it touched not only Yemen but it touched all the nations of the Middle East. And anything like that necessarily was a White House responsibility. It wasn't Komer so much as Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and Bundy assigned it to Komer. And then Kennedy had a

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good deal of confidence in Komer so he let Komer work it out (it was Komer's war).

STEWART: Do you remember any particular irritation of the President as far as the State Department's role in this whole thing was concerned?

FELDMAN: I think again in Yemen, as in other instances, Kennedy lost a little bit of respect for the State Department because the State Department advice wasn't the crisp, well reasoned advice that he was accustomed to. It just kind of slid along, is the only thing I can say. It said that you know, recognition is a good idea and let's just play along with it. It didn't have any bright, forward thinking. It didn't have a plan that we could adopt to accomplish Western objectives to force Nasser to do something. I think that was the point that Kennedy was a little bit upset about, that he felt that in recognizing Yemen we didn't get anything from Nasser. And yet we ourselves lost some ground with other allies, allies like Great Britain.

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STEWART: This is his political instincts coming to the front, I guess, as far as getting something in return for it.

FELDMAN: Yes, that's right. I confess that I felt exactly the same way.

STEWART: What about the trial and the hanging of Eichmann [Adolph Eichmann]? Was there any interest or involvement in this?

FELDMAN: I used to discuss it with Kennedy. The President and I would discuss the Eichmann trial, but not from the standpoint of the United States doing anything or having any interest in it. There was never any suggestion at any time that the United States would become involved in it. But we did discuss the philosophical question of whether, and the political question of, one, whether it was wise for a state like Israel to try Eichmann, convict him and sentence him to death. We were pretty sure that would be the result. Kennedy's feeling was that although the state was almost compelled to do that, he thought they'd probably come out better if, at the conclusion of the trial, they commuted the death sentence and

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just let him live out his life in prison. He said that this would show them to be a humanitarian nation and they'd get some brownie points with the rest of the world for not being vindictive and it wouldn't really hurt them. But at the same time he said that he recognized the political forces that would compel the conviction and death penalty for Eichmann. And I never asked him what he would do if he were the Prime Minister of Israel, but my guess from our discussions was that I think he would have been inclined to just commute the death sentence.

STEWART: But certainly none of this was ever communicated to...

FELDMAN: No, no, no. He, in fact, in our discussions, why, it was absolutely clear that these were just personal discussions. We never sent a cable to Barbour [Walworth Barbour] or anybody in Israel. He didn't even ask me on any of the trips I took to Israel to convey this feeling. He always considered it was none of our business. These were just hypothetical discussions. I mean they were brief, you know, it wasn't extended ones. These were over a period of

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time. Occasionally I'd raise the subject, rather than he, because I was interested in the question myself and I wondered how he would react. So, we didn't have any official connection with Eichmann.

STEWART: You said you had no real involvement in the whole Kuwait controversy.

FELDMAN: Refresh my recollection about the Kuwait situation.

STEWART: Well, in June '61 the British protectorate ended and there was a dispute with Iraq. Iraq said that Kuwait was part of Iraq and...

FELDMAN: Oh, yes. I had no connection with that.

STEWART: The Jordan River dispute?

FELDMAN: Yes, I had a good deal to do with that.

STEWART: Was there a real attempt at a new settlement of that?

FELDMAN: Well, I don't know how to answer that question. Although at the President's suggestion I attended a good many conferences over at the State Department with the Assistant Secretary and with his experts on the development of American policy in this dispute over the water of the Jordan River. The basic assumption

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of the State Department was that we were committed to the Eric Johnston Plan and that the waters should be used in conformity with that plan, even if the states along the border hadn't signed the Plan and agreed between themselves that that's what they would do.

STEWART: This went back to what, 1953, '54?

FELDMAN: Yes, the early fifties. Eric Johnston developed this plan for the use of the Jordan River. Now I also had discussions – and discussed it with the President when I came back – with Israelis who were in touch with the great water carrier that was using the Jordan River. I asked them the basic questions, that is weren't they taking too much water from the Jordan which would lower Lake Kinneret, weren't they increasing the salinity of the water so that the Arab riparian owners would lose some – this is what they were claiming to our ambassadors – and so on; all the questions that we were getting in cables from the Arab ambassadors reflecting what their

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governments from the Syrian ambassador primarily, to some extent Jordan. Well, not only did I get assurances from the Israelis I talked to – I talked to Jacky Hertaog who was in the foreign office and familiar with it, I visited the place where the carrier was being constructed and talked to the engineers, not only did they say and prove that their development was consistent with the Johnston Plan, but they said that they had a complaint against Syria. They had two complaints against them. One complaint was the general complaint against all the Arab nations who were developing a plan to divert the waters to which Israel was entitled and were in fact starting to build a canal to bypass that part of the Jordan from which Israel was taking its water. And secondly they were building a huge dam at a place called Mukeiba and this dam would back up waters which again would reduce the water level and wouldn't permit Israel to use all of its water. I conveyed that to the President and the President asked

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State Department for its thoughts on what the United States ought to do. The advice he got from State was to the effect that all the things the Arabs were doing, although they weren't completely consistent with the Johnson Plan, they would not affect the right of Israel to withdraw a reasonable amount of water. The problem then was – I remember we had a very specific problem as to what we should do at the United Nations on this. I met with the Assistant Secretary for the United Nations organizations and with his staff. We hammered out a policy at Kennedy's direction which was not what the State Department originally went in with. They originally went in with a policy that just about took the whole solid Arab line. We decided that American policy – I've forgotten what vote was involved, but there must have been a vote involved in all this – but I remember we decided that American policy would be complete support for Israel in its development of the national water carrier. There was a minor question as to whether what Israel was doing didn't

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exceed the Johnston Plan in some areas. I was convinced and Kennedy was convinced, after looking – you know, after getting a paper, he didn't really look into it himself, this was not that high on the agenda – was convinced that what they were doing was within a reasonable variation of the Johnston Plan and therefore was all right. We adopted that as the policy and we went one step farther. As I remember it, we asked our ambassadors in Syria and in Jordan to make representations to the governments enlisting their support of reasonable diversion of the water. Although we did this, I don't think it had a great deal of effect.

One other thing that I remember in connection with the Jordan River development was Kennedy's feeling that water was extremely important to the Middle East and that the Jordan River development project could be a bridge between the Arabs and the Israelis. He always had the feeling that the United States could perform its best function by trying to build a bridge between the Arabs and the Israelis. The only

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one that looked like it was important enough and had the potential for being fruitful enough to carry this out was the water development. That is also why he also supported a desalting project. But prior to desalting was the Jordan River development. And he thought that if the Arabs and Israelis worked together on this they would work together on other things and gradually peace would come to the area, which was quite different from the refugee problem because on the refugee problem he always had a feeling that this was a friction point and the less we did the best, the better. But on the use of water this was a potentially cooperative venture, the more we did on that the better it would be for peace in the Middle East.

STEWART: Is there anything else?

FELDMAN: That's all, I suppose, on water. Did we ever discuss, at any time, the crisis in Jordan and the sixth fleet and how it was going to be used at the time that King Hussein [King Hussein I] was threatened?

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STEWART: ...didn't go into it. You mentioned a weekend that, where it became real crucial, but you didn't go into...

FELDMAN: Particularly in the light of what has happened June 5th to June 9th, 1967 I think it's interesting to discuss the crisis in Jordan when Nasser and his agents were undermining King Hussein and the throne was threatened. We got word – I got word, as a matter of fact, and went and told Kennedy that...The papers were full of it and I knew from the sources I had in the Israeli government that Israel viewed this as an extremely serious matter. I don't know whether Israel would have moved and taken over the West Bank of the Jordan if King Hussein had fallen that weekend. I think they would have. And if they had then the question was whether or not they would be branded an aggressor. Kennedy called a meeting one weekend attended by himself and McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and me and Dean Rusk, I guess. That's all there was at that Saturday morning meeting. And the issue was what do we do if Hussein falls? There was a considerable discussion during which McNamara took the position that

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essentially Israel was relying on guarantees from the United States and should continue to rely on these guarantees the only way the United States could prove to Israel that these guarantees were effective was by keeping its armed forces in readiness to help. So he suggested that orders be given to move the sixth fleet from Gibraltar to the eastern Mediterranean. And the President agreed with that. And while we were then in the White House the orders were given to move the sixth fleet to the eastern Mediterranean. He did not make the ultimate decision as to whether or not planes from the sixth fleet would be used to help or hinder Israel. But he did make the decision that the planes would be available for some military purpose. And in fact the, as I remember, the fleet got as far as Italy when the crisis seemed to be over. But after that in my discussions with the Israeli officials I would point to this instance which I knew about to prove the fact that we stood ready to use our military forces and meet our commitments

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to guarantee the territorial integrity of Israel, and that in the last analysis it wasn't the Israeli army that would have to defend itself but it was the planes of the sixth fleet that were there and would form an air cover. So they had to rely on that and they shouldn't therefore pay too much attention to the preponderance of arms that they might have, particularly if you're going to begin to deal with what happened later on when some of these commitments weren't particularly honored. I counted at one time how many times we told the government of Israel that they could rely on our commitments to defend them in the event they were attacked by the Arab nations. And during the five years I was in the White House there were twenty such incidents, of which 19 were given during the Kennedy period and one during the Johnson

[Lyndon B. Johnson] period.

STEWART: The President was always insistent on giving this assurance?

FELDMAN: Yes. He said, "You can't defend yourself against a hundred million Arabs. You just have to rely on

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the United States. We'll always keep the sixth fleet there." And then we'd point to what we did with the sixth fleet at the time Hussein was threatened and used it again and again as proof. Now, Shimon Peres, who was the Deputy Minister of Defense of Israel, he used to pooh, pooh that. He said, "No, the United States would never come to the defense of Israel." He said, "We have to defend ourselves and we know it. We're not asking you to do that, we just ask that you keep out of it and try to keep Russia out of it." And in the light of subsequent events I think he was right. So that weekend was a pretty tough weekend. Neither Rusk nor McNamara nor Kennedy nor I were free at all.

STEWART: No one else was immediately involved in it?

FELDMAN: We were the only four that met on it. And they were secret orders, but it got out somehow. As a matter of fact, a week or so after that a story appeared in the paper that the sixth fleet had moved from Gibraltar to Italy.

STEWART: What about this whole matter of the German technicians

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in the UAR, the Israeli spies in Switzerland?

FELDMAN: Well, let's take each one separately. On the German technician question, this was a matter of considerable concern to the President. And he asked that the CIA give him an analysis of the effect of the three hundred – I think there were three hundred German technicians at the time. And the CIA came back with a story that of the three hundred German technicians there were only three that knew anything about atomic warheads and that these three couldn't function effectively because they didn't have any technicians that could act as assistants to them. So the German technicians could make a lot of noise and they could be good propaganda device, but they'd never give Egypt atomic warheads or missiles. He asked me to check that. And I checked it with the Israeli intelligence. And they didn't have quite the same opinion. They were more guarded. But after allowing for the fact that they wanted us to exert whatever pressure we

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could to get the technicians out of Egypt, I came to just about the same conclusion and so did the President. So we never put any pressure on Egypt to get those technicians out. What we did do though was instruct our ambassador to the German government to discuss with the German government the presence of German nationals in Egypt. And the result of that, as you may remember, was that the German government made it pretty uncomfortable for German nationals to go abroad and work on military matters. And it was partly in response to pressure we put on the German government. But we didn't regard it as much of a threat to American interests in the near East. There were two or three of them that were good, but the rest of them were pretty second rate. The Weitzman Institute I told the President had more technicians of a better caliber in one department than all three hundred German technicians. In fact Egypt put out the story there were five hundred German technicians,

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not three hundred, but our CIA said there were only three hundred and they were just that, technicians, they weren't really scientists. Maybe three of them were, you know, second rate scientists. But even they weren't the top grade scientist.

STEWART: And the other matter of the spies in Switzerland?

FELDMAN: Well, we didn't pay much attention to that. That was more a political – you know political pressure for the United States to take some position with regard to that. But we regarded this as an Israeli problem and not a problem of ours. So all we did was get information. And our ambassador to Switzerland and our ambassador to Israel would cable us what the facts were and what they knew of the trials and so on. But we never asked them to take any action with regard to it. So American policy I would say was non-committal, completely neutral on the question of spies in Switzerland at that time.

STEWART: Do you recall anything of the President's personal reactions to the visits of the Shah of Iran in April

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of '62 and King Saud [Ibn Saud] in February in '62 – what he thought of these people personally and so forth?

FELDMAN: Yes. He thought they were opposites. He thought the Shah was a pretty attractive fellow and it would be useful to have a close relationship with Iran. He thought it would also be useful to maintain a dialogue with the Saudi Arabian king, Ibn Saud, but was a little distrustful of him and didn't particularly like him – he wasn't the Kennedy type. But he did try to use the visit as a way in which he could open a dialogue with Saudi Arabia. And they did exchange some correspondence, some personal correspondence. He did that with a good many visiting heads

of state, even when Prince Bernhard [zu Lippe-Biesterfeld Bernhard] of the Netherlands came over, for instance, he followed that up with just personal messages that didn't go through the State Department route, just personal letters in which they would discuss things of mutual interest. In fact Prince Bernhard got

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into trouble I remember in one instance. That had nothing to do with the Middle East though so I won't tell you about it. But he did use visits from heads of state and from, you know, from the monarchies as a way to open a dialogue between heads of state and the American government. And he used the visit of Ibn Saud for that purpose. He didn't like him, he didn't have much admiration for him. But he did write to him afterwards and try to get some commitments from him. But actually Ibn Saud even then wasn't in control of Saudi Arabia. His rival was the more powerful force.

STEWART: But he personally got along well with the Shah?

FELDMAN: Yes, he did. He liked the Shah. There were several people, as heads of state, that he liked a great deal. And they are a wide spectrum of people; people as different as Nkrumah [Kwame Nkrumah], who he also liked a great deal....

STEWART: Yes, I've heard that, I think.

FELDMAN: He'd a communist and the Shah, who was just the opposite of a communist. It didn't matter what the

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person's political instincts were. What was important to Kennedy apparently was the brilliance of his mind and the way he thought and the way he reacted and whether he was alive or whether he'd put him to sleep. He used to say that too many of the heads of state would put him to sleep. But he thought a young, bright fellow like Nkrumah – he'd get interested in him, in fact had him stay at the White House with him.

STEWART: Yes. Dave Powers [David F. Powers] made a classic comment about he's our kind of Shah.

FELDMAN: Yes. [Laughter]

STEWART: The decision regarding the air base in Iran, were you at all involved in this?

FELDMAN: Yes, to a limited extent.

STEWART: In Saudi Arabia, I mean.

FELDMAN: Yes, you mean Dhahran or whatever the name of the place was. There were two problems with regard to the air base in Saudi Arabia. One was the problem of whether the United States should

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have an air base there. Second, the problem of whether Jews should be assigned there. And both were minor tempests at one time or another. The establishment of the air base as I remember it was recommended by McNamara. And he felt that this would be useful in tying Saudi Arabia into the United States as a kind of an ally. And the President told him to go ahead with it after – the only way I became involved is he would check with me to see whether or not I could see any major political repercussions in the United States as a result of it. And I, after checking, didn't see any. In fact later on they got a couple of squadrons of 4F's I think, which we sent to Saudi Arabia. The second problem was a problem of whether or not any Jews should be assigned there – the President was very firm on. He said that if we have a base there – and this was contrary to the advice we were getting from the Department of State – he said if we have a base there it would

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have to be one in which we don't make any commitments as to the religion of the people we assign there. In fact the Department of Defense did what it customarily does when we have a military installation in an Arab country. And they screened the Jews out of it. And they did it in this instance. This raised some fuss in the newspapers and in the Jewish press. I remember one of the comments the President made when I came in with some of these clippings, he said, "Do you mean to say there are some Jewish mothers screaming to send their children to Saudi Arabia?" I said, "I don't think that's quite it. I think they're mothers who want other children to go there. They think this is discrimination." He said, "Well, why don't you see whether or not we can't get a directive which will make absolutely clear that we're not screening anybody and that we don't intend to screen anybody and if any objections are raised, why, we just won't use the base." And we did correct that as I remember it. We corrected it

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just as soon as word got to the President that this was what the Air Force was doing. But those were the only two connections I had with those two things.

STEWART: What about the sale of the Hawk missiles in 1962 which...

FELDMAN: That was a major matter. That was a really major matter.

STEWART: Do you recall when the discussions really started as to...

FELDMAN: Oh, I'd say the Israelis first asked for sophisticated missiles like the Hawk before Kennedy took office. They asked for them from Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. Soon after Kennedy took office they repeated the request and they were given the stock answer that the United States could not engage in the supply of arms to Israel or to any nation in the Middle East. If they gave it to Israel they'd have to give it to others, so they would not give any weapons, let alone an advanced design weapon like the Hawk or a weapons system like the Hawk, which was the most sophisticated missile in the world at that time, to Israel. That's about when I became involved, and that was in 1961.

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I collected from the Department of Defense and from the State Department all of their answers to the requests of the Israeli government for weapons. And I took them into the President with a little memorandum – I think I still have it – in which I pointed out that we were committed to a balance of arms. If we were committed to a balance of arms and if the Soviet Union was supplying Egypt with SAMMIES – that's Soviet Air missiles – then the balance didn't exist. It was way over on the side of the Egyptians. The United States could either supply the HAWK, which was better than SAM, or they could look around and see if somebody else would supply an equivalent weapon. Kennedy was impressed by that and said, "Let's see whether there are any equivalent weapons." So Komer and I both canvassed the Defense Department to see what they knew of the missiles that other nations had and came to the conclusion that there was no weapon in the world as good as the HAWK. The

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French had one that was very unreliable. The English didn't have any. So the only thing, unless they got it from the Russians, the only thing that the Israelis could use was the Hawk. And they had to have the Hawk. So, you know, again, just as when before, when we talked about Yemen he felt that if he was going to recognize the republican government of Yemen he wanted something from Nasser, he said, "Well, if we make this major departure from American policy toward the near East..." I think this is one of the – I've always believed that this was one of the most important decisions reached by Kennedy during his entire time in office because it could have changed the whole course of the world. He said, "If we're going to give Israel the Hawks" – and he said, "I'm inclined to think that we have to – let's see what we can get from the Israelis." And he said, "The State Department's been asking a lot from the Israelis that they won't give us." They want to make sure that the Israelis don't

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make atomic weapons so we don't have the N country problem. They want to make sure that they have the right to inspect the reactor at Dimona. They want to make sure that the Israelis will settle the refugee problem in a way that it can be settled by taking back a large number of them. And they want the Israelis to give up rights of retaliation that they're always talking

about whenever somebody goes across the border. So let's see what we can do about that." And I said, "Well, you can't do this by cabling our ambassador there." He said, "No. Why don't you go over there and talk to them?" And that was one of the missions I made, a secret mission I made to Israel, in which I went over under some guise, one of many, and....

STEWART: This would have probably have been in the summer of '62?

FELDMAN: Yes, yes, just about then. And discussed with them – well, I said this, I said, "I'm not going to go over there and make a bargain with them because any self-respecting

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government is going to resent it. I will go over there and tell them they're going to get the Hawk. And say, Now we're giving you the Hawk, something you just didn't ever expect you'd ever get from the United States government and this is going to make your security much, much better. But if you're going to get the Hawk we want you to cooperate with us in some ways." So he agreed that we could do it that way. So I went over there and my first statement – I met with Ben-Gurion [David Ben-Gurion] who was the Prime Minister then and Golda Meir who was foreign minister – and my first statement was just that. I said, "Now you're going to get the Hawks. The President has decided that we'll give them to you." And of course they were ecstatic. They were to celebrate at that moment. It was the first time they ever heard it. And they really hadn't expected it. They didn't know what they were going to do. I said, "Now, now that you've come down off the roof, let me tell you what we think you ought to do also." And I went

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through the various other things that they had said. Well, they were pretty good about Dimona and the atomic reactor. In fact they said that they would join the International Atomic Energy Agency which permits inspection by international groups providing the Egyptians didn't come to inspect the reactor. And they said they certainly would permit Americans to come in and inspect the reactor and that they weren't going to make any weapons grade material at the moment so that we didn't have to be concerned about atomic weapons being made then. On the refugee problem they were much more tougher. They said they couldn't see what solution there might be. They would take a limited number of refugees. And I think I went through this – already discussed the refugees. But they were really amenable to it. I thought that they gave up a lot, and so did the State Department. I would report back my conversations – these meetings lasted over a period of three days – and I'd cable back to

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Washington the result of each meeting. And I would get cables back from State, who had an anti-Israel bias, and they said the meetings were going great. They were delighted with the

results that were being obtained.

STEWART: Who in State had an anti-Israel bias?

FELDMAN: Oh, they all did, beginning with Phil Talbot [Phillips Talbot] who was the Assistant Secretary for the Middle East. But his wasn't so much an anti-Israel bias as he reflected the bias of people below him.

Below him was a fellow named Crawford [William A. Crawford] whose reasoning was that the United States had nothing to gain – and Kennedy was too.... We used to discuss this – his reasoning was the United States had nothing to gain by being pro-Israel; they had everything to gain by being pro-Arab, so why not cultivate the Arabs? Israel can't give them any oil. Israel doesn't control any large territories so that it can't give them any communication or transportation at the crossroads of the world. Israel didn't have large populations. Israel had only

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one vote in international councils so it couldn't support the United States very much. While the Arabs could give them all that, so why should we.... It was a very cold point of view and they had lots of papers that were based on this. They'd send papers to the White House all the time saying our policy ought to be shifted toward the Arabs because the Arabs could do so much for us. Morality apparently didn't play much of a part in their thinking. But anyhow they were pleased with the way the conversations went. And then I came back and met with the President. The President said, "Well, we've told the Israeli government, now, before it gets out in the press let's see that those people who should know about it, know about it." And we decided that we would have two meetings in the White House. One meeting would be with congressmen and senators who were interested and the other meeting would be with leaders of the Jewish community who would be interested in this. So I scheduled those two meetings

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in the White House. I met with them first, with the congressman and senators and with the leaders – I invited, oh, about fifty or sixty leaders of the Jewish community. We met in the Fish Room. I made an introductory statement and then told them what I thought was the significance of the decision that I was going to convey. Phil Klutznick [Philip M. Klutznick] I remember was on one of the meetings. After I finished my presentation he said – I think properly he said, "Without this decision of the United States to give Hawks to Israel I think we would have been faced with war in the Middle East because of the preponderance of Arabs, their power and strength. And there would be no defense against the Arab planes." The Hawk was the only defense against the supersonic planes that the Arabs had." So he was grateful. Then the President came in and spoke for maybe five minutes to the group in which he expressed his feelings about why this was essential and why the decision was in the best interest of the United

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States. And then the second meeting, which followed the first by maybe a day or two, was with the members of – and I cautioned everybody there to keep it quiet. I said if I read this in the newspapers I'd be very disappointed in my group of people. The second meeting was held with maybe twenty, twenty-five congressmen and senators. It was called by Manny Sellers, the dean of the New York delegation. I went through much the same ritual. At the end of the meeting the President came and again he made the same kind of statement and again this meeting was held in the Fish Room too. And the conclusion of the meeting again they raised the question, "It's fine to know about this, but how do we take advantage of it? What do we tell our people in our newsletters and newspapers and so on?" I said I thought it was in the best interests of the United States and their constituents and everybody else not to tell anybody, that I was convinced the news would get out as soon as we started training.

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You see, in selling the Hawks...The Hawks were quite a problem because you – well anyhow let me finish the...In selling the Hawks you had to have a lead time of about eighteen months as I remember. Now, during those eighteen months the news would get out; but let's let it leak out gradually, let's not have a big announcement. Selling Hawks is not just a matter of picking something off the shelf and giving it to them. The first thing you have to do is you have to get a battalion to come to the United States to be trained in the weapon and to learn how to, more than operate it, to maintain it is more important. And we planned on having the first Israeli cavalry go to Fort Bliss for training in about a month. And then after they're trained in maintenance and in the use of the weapon, then you had to schedule the production for Israel. In order for Israel to get it – these weapons were in great demand by all American allies, all the NATO nations wanted

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them because it was a very advanced and very sophisticated weapon. So the next thing was to try and get a place in the production line. We had to put Israel ahead of some country – could we put them ahead of Germany, which was defending its frontier against the Soviet Union, or we could certainly put them ahead of France. Could we put them ahead of England? Well, we finally decided that only Germany and England had a higher priority. We put them ahead of Denmark as I remember. Denmark also had a claim to Hawks and we were going to fly Hawks to Denmark. And then the third question after that was how are we going to be paid for it? There is no military grant program for Israel. Israel is one of the few allies that we have that we don't have that kind of a program for. And these weapons cost a lot of money. One battery costs twenty five million dollars. So who's going to pay for them? The Department of Defense said, "Well, we just want cash, that's all. Israel has to collect twenty five

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million dollars cash and give it to us.” Well, the Israeli government said, “We can’t. We don’t pay cash for anything. We buy everything on credit.” So I checked and found that we were giving the Australian government weapons on a ten year loan at three and a half percent interest. So I went in to see the President and I said, “Look, if we’re giving the Australian government weapons on a ten year loan at three and a half percent we can do at least as well for the Israelis.” So he called McNamara and asked him whether this was so, and McNamara said, “Yes, this is so. But that’s the only government in the world that gets it. Everybody else has three years or either cash. Either cash or three years as the maximum and we charge them six percent interest.” So, Kennedy was pretty good about this. He said, “Well, this nation can’t afford to pay that much.” He had on his desk a paper from the State Department showing Israel could afford to pay cash. This was pretty funny too. But I told him

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who had prepared the paper and under what circumstances. And he said to McNamara, “This nation can’t really afford to pay cash. And twenty five million dollars isn’t much in a hundred billion dollar budget.” He said, “Let’s lend them the money on the same terms as the Australians.” So they got it on ten year credit, three and a half percent interest. The significance of that is that since then Israel has gotten other weapons from us. In a sense this broke the dam. From then on we started supplying them with other things. We gave them tanks and gave them airplanes and gave them other things, up until the decision was made to give them Hawks Israel had never gotten any weapons from the United States. So, after that though, these terms became fixed terms and any time we sold anything to the Israelis they’d say, “We got ten years and three and a half percent on the Hawks. We certainly ought to get them on the tanks and planes and everything else.” And there wasn’t much of an answer to it. “Why

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do you tighten up your terms? So it worked out very well, up until today. Now, today they’re threatened, as you may know, from the newspapers, today that revolving fund that is used in the Department of Defense to advance this credit has been cut out by an amendment on a Senate committee. And there’s going to be a fight on the floor next week to see whether or not it can be restored. If it’s restored I think Israel can continue to get ten years at three and a half percent interest. If it’s not, then they’re going to have to pay cash for weapons in the future.

STEWART: What precisely did you hope to gain by letting the news leak out as opposed to making an announcement?

FELDMAN: Well, if you make an announcement you get a series of diatribes on all the Arab radio stations and in all the newspapers; they get up in the United Nations and make speeches about how the United States was giving Israel these advanced weapons. It would have been very uncomfortable for us. And

there are those in the Congress and in the country generally who

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just don't favor supporting Israel. I could name organization after organization – we'd get a lot of mail and we'd get a lot of opposition and we could just as well do without that. So if we didn't make the announcement and it just gradually leaked there wouldn't be this sudden, mass condemnation of that action. I think we accomplished several purposes though. Number one, the good purpose that we wouldn't be subjected to these diatribes. Number two, everybody likes to feel that they're in on a secret, and if this group of leaders that came to the White House felt that this was really a secret they would feel privileged and for that reason they would have a warmer feeling about it and they would carry it out that way. And thirdly there was a long time between the time the decision was made and the time the first battery of weapons was sent. And we'd like to keep that as short as possible, between the time of public information and the time the weapons are sent because there

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again there are influences that would try to change the decision. For all those reasons we didn't want a lot of publicity.

STEWART: Well, I read someplace that Nasser was informed in advance. Now this probably was in advance of the actual delivery but after the...

FELDMAN: Nasser was not told about it.

STEWART: In fact, I think Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] has that in his book that...

FELDMAN: He was told in advance?

STEWART: I could be wrong.

FELDMAN: I don't know whether he has it in his book, but Arthur also has it in his book that someday Mike Feldman ought to write the story of the Middle East.

STEWART: Yes. He said that you and Komer are the only two that would tell.

FELDMAN: I think that's true. But Nasser was not told in advance about Hawks. He was told in advance of delivery, yes; but not in advance of the decision.

STEWART: But it probably was common knowledge by them.

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FELDMAN: Well, I don't know. The secret was kept pretty well. I was surprised. I thought that in the following morning I'd see it in the New York Times, but it wasn't. And I went into the President's office about a week later and said, "I told you that my Jews could keep a secret." And he said, "That's right." It was kept quiet.

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