

ABSTRACT

PRIVATE WAR: ILLEGAL ACTIONS, PRIVATE CITIZENS, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE U.S.-ISRAEL SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

The U.S.-Israel “special relationship” receives vast attention from scholars seeking to trace its origins and implications, yet the focus consistently remains on Washington, D.C. as the birthplace and nerve center of an ironclad pro-Israel foreign policy. The consensus found in historical scholarship is that from 1945 to 1949, the Truman administration made a series of commitments to the Jewish state, primarily out of political expediency, which defied the pro-Arab sentiments of the State Department and set U.S. foreign policy on a pro-Israel course. This study examines early U.S.-Israel relations from outside the sphere of Washington by recovering an illegal, clandestine arms movement undertaken across the United States that violated the U.S. arms embargo, supported the Jewish war effort, and ultimately forced the hand of a conflicted president. The examination begins with the emergence of American involvement in the Palestine problem and explores how the processes of demilitarization and asset liquidation after World War II created the opportunity for American Jews to procure war materiel and smuggle it to Israel during its war of independence. The study then depicts two stories of asset procurement that operated out of California between 1947-1948 to demonstrate the extent of this clandestine activity, the impact it had on the outcome of the First Arab-Israeli War, and the influence it had on the views and foreign policy decisions of the White House and Department of State.

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PRIVATE WAR: ILLEGAL ACTIONS, PRIVATE CITIZENS,
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE U.S.-ISRAEL SPECIAL
RELATIONSHIP

by
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

President Harry S. Truman sat at his Oval Office desk, his figure backlit by the center bay window located directly behind him. It was May 12, 1948, and at four o'clock in the afternoon Truman undertook the last appointment on his daily calendar. The president had personally scheduled this meeting with the purpose of discussing one of the most important and troubling policy issues he and his administration inherited three years earlier when the untimely death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt catapulted Truman into the presidency. The subject of the meeting centered on which approach the United States should take toward the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine, and more specifically on whether or not Truman should extend immediate recognition to the highly controversial Jewish state when it declared its independence just two days later.¹

The debate over recognition stemmed from a deeper divide between the White House and the State Department over whether or not the United States should support the existence of a Jewish state. The divide had been widening since shortly after the end of World War II, when President Truman requested that Great Britain—which served as the administrative authority in Palestine—allow 100,000 displaced Jewish refugees to migrate from Europe to Palestine. However, since 1939, the British had acquiesced to Arab demands by restricting the number of Jews that could migrate to the region, and despite Truman's request they showed no interest in amending that policy. Unlike Truman, the State Department was sympathetic to the British and Arab points of view and feared that supporting Jewish mass immigration into Palestine would anger the Arabs and thus put the

¹ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 595, 614; Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York, Random House, 1991), 5.

United States at odds with the controlling interests in the oil-rich and strategically located Middle East. For that reason, State officials urged Truman not to press the immigration issue. On the surface, the president acknowledged their concerns and gave them the impression that he would follow their advice. Deep down, however, he felt that the “striped pants boys” in the State Department “didn’t care enough about what happened to the thousands of displaced persons” housed in Allied refugee camps, so he defiantly continued to call for the allowance of more Jews into Palestine.² At times, he even advocated for a Jewish state if at all peaceably attainable.

By the fall of 1947, the White House and State Department were beginning to reach an impasse as changing conditions in the Palestine situation put their different philosophies to the test. Earlier that year, the British handed the Palestine problem over to the United Nations and announced that they would soon terminate their mandate. In response, the United Nations assembled a special committee to investigate the Arab-Jewish conflict and develop a solution. In September 1947, the committee produced two reports: a majority report, which had the support of most committee members, and a minority report. The majority report recommended that the land of Palestine be partitioned into two independent states, one Arab and one Jewish. The United States had an interest in promoting the legitimacy of the United Nations as a governing body, so Secretary of State George C. Marshall immediately gave a calculated statement before the U.N. General Assembly in which he declared that the United States gave “great weight”

² John B. Judis, *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014), 200-201; Dan Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement with the Palestine Problem* (Los Angeles: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 149-150; David Schoenbaum, *The United States and the State of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.

to the recommendations of the U.N. Special Committee, especially those recommendations that received “unanimous approval.”³ The two-state solution received majority approval, but not unanimous approval, and for that reason Marshall felt the committee needed to give further consideration to whether or not partition was the best approach.

Loy Henderson, the State Department’s Director of Near Eastern and African Affairs, made it clear to Marshall that he considered partition to be a huge mistake. On September 22, he wrote a detailed memorandum in which he outlined problems the United States could incur if it backed partition. Most of the higher-ranking officials in the State Department accepted Henderson’s assessment as fact. Marshall, however, remained open to any potential solution, even partition, so long as it was workable for all parties involved.⁴ Across the board, the department took the position that Washington needed to handle the Palestine issue with kid gloves. Henderson argued that supporting partition in the face of Arab resistance jeopardized U.S. access to Middle Eastern oil, a valuable asset that served American military and economic needs. Furthermore, if the United States became persona non grata in the Middle East, the Arabs might open the door to the Soviet Union—a dire prospect considering Washington’s policy of communist containment.⁵ And finally, so long as the Arabs refused to agree to partition under any terms, such a solution could only be imposed through force.⁶ Neither the

³ Statement by Secretary of State George C. Marshall before the United Nations General Assembly, September 17, 1947, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Volume V, The Near East and Africa* (Washington: The U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 1151.

⁴ Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 228.

⁵ Leon T. Hadar, *Quagmire: America in the Middle East* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1992), 45.

⁶ Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs, Loy Henderson, to Secretary of State George C. Marshall, September 22, 1947, 501.BB Palestine/9-2247, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Volume V, The Near East and Africa*, 1153-1158; Memorandum of Conversation by Paul H. Alling, Advisor to the United States Delegation at the General Assembly, September 26, 1947, 501.BB Palestine/9-

State Department, nor the Defense Department, nor even President Truman for that matter had any intentions of allocating American troops to enforce the resolution.⁷

The U.S. Delegation to the United Nations was assigned to an Ad Hoc Committee tasked with the reviewing and reconstituting the majority plan to create the best possible approach to partition. In an effort to make the two-state solution more acceptable to the Arabs, Marshall approved an adjustment to the land distribution that gave the Arabs more land in the southern part of Palestine. But at the last minute, Truman overrode the State Department's attempt to find a more workable solution and instead instructed the delegation to leave the partition plan and its territorial allotments as they were.⁸ On November 29, the partition plan came up for a vote in the U.N. General Assembly and received the necessary two-thirds support to pass.⁹

Washington monitored the response in Palestine closely. Expectedly, the Jews were overjoyed and the Arabs were outraged. Civil war broke out immediately. Just halfway into December more than a hundred Arabs and Jews were dead and more than five hundred were wounded. To make matters worse, the Arab countries surrounding Palestine were preparing to invade and put an end to Jewish aspirations of statehood.¹⁰ The State Department made multiple efforts

2647, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Volume V, The Near East and Africa*, 1160; State Department Memorandum, September 30, 1947, 501.BB Palestine/9-3047, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Volume V, The Near East and Africa*, 1166-1170.

⁷ Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *Israel and the American National Interest: A Critical Examination* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 36-37.

⁸ Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 247-248.

⁹ Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 237.

¹⁰ Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 241.

to placate the Arabs and promote peace in the region, but none worked. Nearly six months after hostilities began, a handful of State officials gathered in the Oval Office for the May 12 meeting with Truman, hoping to convince the president not to extend early recognition to the Jewish state—an act which would only further commit the United States to one side of the issue.

Chairs were arranged ahead of time on either side of the Oval Office desk. To the president's left sat Secretary Marshall, whom Truman regarded to be the "greatest living American."¹¹ Marshall's undersecretary sat beside him and two policy officials from the department were seated in the rear. On the other side of the desk, to the president's right, sat his special counsel, Clark Clifford, his special assistant for minority affairs, David Niles, and his appointments secretary.¹² The separation of the chairs imitated a separation in views. Marshall and the State Department were adamantly opposed to early recognition. Clifford and Niles were passionately in favor of it. Fittingly, Truman was positioned squarely in the middle of the two sides. It was essentially a literal representation of the figurative place he held during the first three years of his presidency.

The Palestine debate was not a new one. Truman encountered the issue while serving as a senator, and had remained consistently favorable to the idea of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Conditions in the spring of 1948, however, challenged his resolve. He called the May 12 meeting after a phone conversation he had with Marshall the previous week left him feeling uneasy about just how far apart he and his Secretary of State were on the issue. After Marshall and his undersecretary finished making their case for withholding recognition, Clifford

¹¹ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 3.

¹² Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 9-10.

offered his rebuttal. Unbeknownst to anyone else in the room, days earlier Truman had asked Clifford to use the May 12 meeting as an opportunity to present a compelling argument in favor of immediately recognizing the Jewish state. A tall order though it was, Truman hoped Clifford could somehow convince Secretary Marshall to get behind the idea.¹³ It turned out he could not.

Marshall trusted his advisors in the State Department and deeply distrusted—in fact, even disliked—Clark Clifford. When Marshall left the White House later that day, Clifford had not only failed to convince him to accept early recognition but had infuriated him in his effort to do so. Immediately after Clifford laid out his seven-point argument in favor of recognition, Marshall, who sat through Clifford's presentation in a state of quiet contempt, turned to Truman and rejected the entire argument. He felt that such a crucial foreign policy discussion should only involve the president and his foreign policy advisors, not a lawyer who he considered to be “pressing a political consideration” instead of focusing on national security.¹⁴ So sure was Marshall that domestic political considerations were supplanting the national interest that he looked Truman in the eye and blurted out in a fit of rage, “If you follow Clifford's advice and if I were to vote in the election, I would vote against you.”¹⁵ Truman showed no emotion but it was a heavy blow coming from his own Secretary of State and a man he greatly admired. If only momentarily, it seemed dramatic enough a response to stop the president in his tracks. Truman concluded the meeting by assuring Marshall that he fully understood the dangers of supporting Jewish interests over those of the Arabs, and in light of those dangers was inclined to side with Marshall

¹³ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 5-6.

¹⁴ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 12.

¹⁵ Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 13.

in the matter.¹⁶ Not only had the meeting failed to bring all sides into a single camp on the issue, it even appeared that the elder statesman and former general might have defeated Clifford in persuading the president to abandon the idea altogether.

The following day, with the end of British rule in Palestine fast approaching, a reporter asked President Truman if he had reached a decision on whether or not to recognize “the new Palestine state”—the Jewish state—when it declared independence. Truman answered, “I will cross that bridge when I get to it.”¹⁷ With only a day to spare, Truman was running out of real estate between him and the decision. The bridge would be upon him soon. Where he would land on the other side of it was completely up in the air.

On the morning of May 14, the president was still undecided.¹⁸ Around midday, the Jewish Agency for Palestine notified the White House that the Jewish state of Israel would in fact be born into existence effective 6:01 p.m., Washington time.¹⁹ That evening, at 6:11 p.m., President Truman extended de facto recognition to the new nation, making the United States the first country to officially recognize Israel.²⁰ Despite a genuine reverence for his distinguished Secretary of State, and despite seeing the logic in the State Department argument,

16 Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 13; McCullough, *Truman*, 616.

17 President Harry S. Truman’s News Conference, 13 May 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1620>

18 Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 19.

19 Eliahu Epstein to President Harry S. Truman, May 14, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/israel/large/documents/index.php?documentid=49&pagenumber=1.

20 Draft of recognition statement signed by President Truman at 6:11 p.m. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/israel/large/documents/index.php?documentid=48&pagenumber=1.

something convinced Truman to recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish state after all.²¹

Truman's diplomatic support of the Zionist cause defied the objections of his senior cabinet officials—including Secretary of State George Marshall, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, and Secretary of the Treasury John Snyder—all of whom were all fearful of alienating the oil-rich Arabs. As a result, historians tend to attribute the beginning of a lasting pro-Israel policy in Washington to President Truman, and often cite his May 14 act of recognition as the tipping point. The respected diplomatic historian George C. Herring wrote that Truman's decision to recognize the new Jewish state was the “first step in building what would be the U.S.-Israeli special relationship.”²² Gabriel Sheffer, a political scientist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, calls Truman's policy the “main factor in the establishment of the Jewish state.”²³ Avraham Sela of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute agrees. He wrote that apart from the Zionist movement and Palestine's Jewish community, Truman was the “most important factor enabling the establishment of the Jewish state.”²⁴ These historians, and many others, believe that Truman was not only instrumental in laying the groundwork

²¹ Michael J. Cohen, “Truman's Recognition of Israel: The Domestic Factor,” in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. by Michael J. Devine (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 127.

²² George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 629.

²³ Gabriel Sheffer, “Bevin, Truman, and Palestine, 1945-1948,” in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. by Michael J. Devine (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 39-40.

²⁴ Avraham Sela, “The Arabs, Truman, and the Birth of the State of Israel,” in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. by Michael J. Devine (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 39-40.

for a special relationship between the United States and Israel, but was fundamentally important to the very existence of the Jewish state.

Some historians, especially those critical of America's pro-Israel policy, view Truman as the founder of a tainted legacy. In *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, author John Judis wrote that, "the pattern of surrender to Israel and its supporters began in the Truman years."²⁵ Historian Mohamed El-Khawas and political scientist Samir Abed-Rabbo contend that "the U.S. commitment to Israel has a long history dating back to President Truman's recognition of Israel," and since that moment, the United States has "acted as a patron of the Zionist state."²⁶ Similarly, political scientist Cheryl Rubenberg asserted that by recognizing the Jewish state, "Truman placated his domestic Jewish critics and set the United States on a long-term course of support for the new state."²⁷ In any case, Truman again takes center stage in the origins of the U.S.-Israel special relationship.

Since historians widely cast Truman as the principal character in formulating U.S. policy toward Israel, the discourse of early U.S.-Israeli relations most often involves an emphasis on the factors at play when Truman, on several occasions, went against the advice of the foreign policy establishment in favor of supporting the Zionist cause. The general consensus is that a multitude of factors ultimately influenced Truman's policy decisions—his faith, the Holocaust, the postwar refugee situation in Europe, emerging Cold War tensions, the Zionist

²⁵ Judis, *Genesis*, 7.

²⁶ Mohamed El-Khawas and Samir Abed-Rabbo, *American Aid to Israel: Nature and Impact* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1984), 63, 118.

²⁷ Rubenberg, *Israel and the American National Interest*, 39.

lobby, midterm and presidential elections—however these factors can be best understood in the context of two larger themes: moral and political.

The moral, or humanitarian, argument essentially contends that President Truman acted in favor of Zionism out of (1) his sympathy for Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, (2) an urgent desire to help resettle displaced European Jews who had been stripped of their possessions by the Nazis, and (3) a Biblically-based understanding that the Jews had a God-ordained right to settle in the land of Palestine. There is little denying that Truman was deeply affected by the reports and images that poured in as Allied forces began liberating concentration camps in Germany, Austria, and Poland. Historians Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, who co-wrote an essay examining the influence on foreign policy exercised by Truman's pro-Zionist advisors, took pause to recognize the impact that the destitute condition of Holocaust victims and survivors had on the president. They cite Truman's own description of the experience, taken from an interview conducted nearly two decades after he laid eyes on the gruesome realities of Hitler's Final Solution. Truman told the interviewer that the horrific images he saw in the spring of 1945 continued to haunt his dreams even to that day.²⁸ An experience that could impart such a long-lasting emotional impact on the president would have certainly influenced his policy decisions in some way. Historians Dennis Ross and Robert P. Watson also make the case that Truman's Palestine policy grew primarily out of humanitarian convictions.²⁹

²⁸ Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, "Truman, Jews, and Zionists," in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. by Michael J. Devine (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 96.

²⁹ Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016), 18-20; Robert P. Watson, "The Man from Missouri," in *The National Security Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, ed. by Robert P. Watson, Michael J. Devine, Robert J. Wolz (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 14.

There are also other angles to the moral argument. Vladislav Zubok, international historian at the London School of Economics and Political Science, contends that Truman's religious beliefs directly influenced his decision to support a Jewish state.³⁰ Cold War historian Elizabeth Edwards Spalding likewise asserts that Truman's study of history and the Bible informed his opinions of Jews and the Middle East, causing him to lend political support to Zionism while serving in the Senate and hold firm to that support as president.³¹ John Mulhall presents yet another take on the moral argument by making the case that Truman's actions were simply upholding the pro-Zionist commitments made by his predecessors—Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge.³²

While many historians support the likelihood that Truman was at least in some part driven by a humanitarian desire to aid the Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution, most conclude that he was more heavily influenced by political exigencies. Ronald Zweig, Professor of Israel Studies at NYU, best summed up the assessment that both moral and political factors were at play when he wrote, "The Truman administration was motivated both by a real sympathy for the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and by the need to win elections for the Democrat Party, at every level of government, in order to establish the legitimacy of a president who had not himself been elected."³³ There were two main sources of

³⁰ Vladislav Zubok, "The Soviet Union and the Establishment of Israel," in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. by Michael J. Devine (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 75.

³¹ Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 96-98.

³² John W. Mulhall, *America and the Founding of Israel: An Investigation of the Morality of America's Role* (Los Angeles: Deshon Press, 1995), 64-65, 88, 90.

³³ Ronald Zweig, "The U.S. Army, Displaced Persons, and American Palestine Policy," in *The National Security Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, ed. by Robert P. Watson, Michael J. Devine, Robert J. Wolz (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 81.

political influence behind Truman's policy decisions: the Zionist lobby, comprised of several powerful Jewish organizations across the country, and Truman's closest and most trusted advisors in the White House.

Several historians believe that heavy-handed tactics employed by the Zionist lobby eventually took a toll on Truman and rendered him unable to keep politics out of the equation. These arguments tend to focus on the militant leadership of Rabbi Hillel Silver, who headed two of the most powerful Jewish organizations in the postwar era: the Zionist Organization of America and the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC). Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh claim that Silver's militant attitude evolved after observing quiet diplomacy fail during the Roosevelt years. Silver vowed he was "not going to let the new president mollify them with empty promises."³⁴ Richard Stevens discussed this at great length in his book, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Stevens claimed that Silver knew how to "take advantage of American domestic politics so as to force the acceptance of the Zionist program on the United States, and thereby on the United Nations."³⁵ Directly appealing to the president was one way of pushing the Zionist agenda, but Silver and other Jewish leaders knew that policy is often determined by a combination of popular and political interest. They aimed to win both. According to Dov Waxman, author of *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel*, AZEC was extremely successful in both arenas and, as a result, successfully influenced Truman's policy on partition and recognition.³⁶

³⁴ Radosh and Radosh, "Truman, Jews, and Zionists," 97.

³⁵ Richard P. Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947* (New York: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1970),

³⁶ Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 154.

Under Silver's leadership, AZEC was extremely effective at winning high-level bipartisan support for Zionism. In the summer of 1945, just months after Truman assumed office, he received two petitions urging him to give public support to Jewish mass immigration into Palestine and the establishment therein of a Jewish national home. One of the petitions had the signatures of thirty-seven of the forty-eight state governors. The other petition had the signatures of 251 representatives and fifty-four senators.³⁷ It was an early and powerful show of political support that led to the first of several instances in which Truman disregarded his foreign policy advisors in the State Department. As John Judis observed, the moment Truman chose to press for Jewish mass immigration in the summer of 1945, "marked a victory for the Zionists and a defeat for the State Department."³⁸ The Zionist lobby made good use of the support it received from elected officials and furthered their cause by appealing to the American public for popular support as well.

To win popular support among American voters, the Zionist lobby played upon certain themes in the media. For example, they often used the horrific images of the Holocaust as justification for a Jewish national home where the Jewish people could live free from persecution and genocide. It was an effective appeal that evoked sympathy from Jews and non-Jews alike. Zionist organizations were also successful in depicting pro-Zionism as an attitude consistent with both liberal and conservative ideals, and juxtaposed that attitude with one of anti-Zionism, which they depicted as being essentially the same as anti-Semitism.³⁹

³⁷ Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947*, 130.

³⁸ Judis, *Genesis*, 201.

³⁹ Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947*, 208-209.

Using these tactics the Zionists were highly effective in garnering some level of support from most Americans. As mid-term and presidential elections drew near, the perceived value of that support from voters and donors increased dramatically. Robert Donovan claimed that despite the State Department's efforts to persuade the president against the Zionist lobby, in the end "the political pressures generated by the competition for Jewish votes and Jewish money prevailed."⁴⁰ Truman always wanted to give an impression that he was immune to allowing such pressures to influence his decisions, but he simply was not.⁴¹

Michael Cohen, an Israeli professor of history, agrees that the "Zionist lobby came into its own during the Truman presidency," and was effective at persuading the administration of its ability to withhold both the Jewish vote and Jewish finance.⁴² However, Cohen maintains that the Zionist lobby's crowning achievement was convincing Truman's personal advisors to embrace the Zionist agenda.⁴³ According to Cohen, Truman was "virtually coerced" by his political advisors into adopting a pro-Zionist platform.⁴⁴ The influence exerted by Truman's advisors in the White House on his Palestine policy receives more attention from scholars than any other factor.

Truman's most influential pro-Zionist advisors were Samuel Rosenman, David Niles, Max Lowenthal, and Clark Clifford.⁴⁵ Two of those men, Clifford

⁴⁰ Robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 320.

⁴¹ Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 68.

⁴² Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 59.

⁴³ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 59.

⁴⁴ Cohen, "Truman's Recognition of Israel: The Domestic Factor," 119.

⁴⁵ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 75-82; Radosh and Radosh, "Truman, Jews, and Zionists," 95.

and Niles, were present at the May 12 meeting addressing the issue of recognition. Clifford, having served as the president's special counsel since 1946, is often considered the most prominent voice in Truman's ear.⁴⁶ At many times he operated as the person through whom Niles and the others channeled their advice. David Niles was an extremely passionate supporter of Zionism—so much so that he was the first person Truman phoned after recognizing Israel on the evening of May 14.⁴⁷

The president's advisors provided Zionism with a constant voice of support in the White House, which became significantly important when Truman grew weary of the Zionist lobby's unending bombardment and, therefore, banned their leadership from visiting him at the White House. Even when Truman ostracized Zionists from the White House, his relationships with his pro-Zionist advisors on the inside remained intact.⁴⁸ They framed their advice in a way that made Truman believe that supporting the Zionist cause was not an act of political expediency, but instead was the morally right thing to do.⁴⁹

The men worked closely with the Democratic National Committee and advised the president on a multitude of issues, including unification of the armed forces, social security, fair employment, and national health care—virtually every aspect of his political platform, and Truman often heeded their advice. None of their recommendations, Palestine included, were made completely devoid of

⁴⁶ John Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), 113; Gary A. Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 21; Harold F. Gosnell, *Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 363.

⁴⁷ Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, "Truman, Jews, and Zionists," 114.

⁴⁸ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 66.

⁴⁹ Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions on Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69.

domestic political considerations. Both Truman and his team were well aware that Jewish votes and Jewish money had the potential to swing the election results in key cities, most important of which was New York City where the largest concentration of American Jewry resided. Clifford detailed this in a memo he wrote for the president in the fall of 1947 that outlined a campaign strategy for the 1948 election year.⁵⁰ While historians still debate the extent to which political exigencies influenced Truman's Palestine policy, it is generally accepted that domestic politics were at play when he made pivotal decisions.⁵¹

Countless books and articles have been written on the Truman presidency and the early stages of U.S.-Israel relations, and each makes a valuable contribution to those fields of study. However, part of the story behind the origins of America's pro-Israel policy is missing from the texts. Many historians have made a fundamental error in postulating that Truman's act of recognition initiated a legacy of pro-Israel support that subsequent administrations have followed ever since.⁵² In placing too much emphasis on the act of recognition, the complexities of Truman's Palestine policy are often oversimplified and the indecisiveness that plagued his approach, even after recognition, is diminished. In the words of one historian, "Many a study of Truman and Israel ends with his recognition of Israel. Even those that acknowledge his indecision over the years end on a note of decisiveness, as if that one moment—when Truman decided to issue a statement recognizing the new state—balanced out the prior three years of frustration,

⁵⁰ Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey*, 24-28.

⁵¹ Gosnell, *Truman's Crises*, 363; Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey*, 23; Cohen, "Truman's Recognition of Israel: The Domestic Factor," 127; Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 114-118; Zachary Karabell, *The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 94.

⁵² El-Khawas and Abed-Rabbo. *American Aid to Israel*, 63, 118; Rubenberg, *Israel and the American National Interest*, 39; Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 116.

equivocation, second-guessing, and regret.”⁵³ The assessment made there is absolutely correct. The act of recognition did not balance out the prior three years of indecision and, as evidenced by the handwringing that took place in the days and hours leading up to Israel’s declaration of independence, Truman’s actions on Palestine were anything but decisive.

The very fact that scholarship on Truman’s Palestine policy is heavy-laden with theses pointing to one factor of influence or another is evidence that the President Truman’s policy lacked conviction. His support of Zionism in the years leading up to recognition has been described as “limited,” “fraught with zigzags,” and “anything but clear-cut and consistent.”⁵⁴ Historians contend that Truman attempted to “straddle the issue,” that there were “fluctuations” in his policies, and that his “decisions on Palestine had vacillated according to the changing pressures of the moment.”⁵⁵ These words hardly describe a policy approach that could set the United States on a firm, pro-Israel track, as many historians argue.

Instances of Truman’s backpedaling appear after virtually every decision he made on Palestine during his first term in office. After establishing a U.S. position that favored Jewish mass immigration into Palestine, he immediately qualified it by stating that he had no intention of allocating any troops to enforce such a policy, and he eventually backed off the issue altogether.⁵⁶ He was no more decisive after supporting the partition plan. Instead, after the General Assembly

⁵³ Judis, *Genesis*, 320.

⁵⁴ Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 18; Cohen, “Truman’s Recognition of Israel: The Domestic Factor,” 127; Joseph B. Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement: The Crucial Decade, 1939-1949* (New York: Herzl Press, 1966), 405.

⁵⁵ Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947*, x; Sheffer, “Bevin, Truman, and Palestine, 1945-1948,” 39; Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 139.

⁵⁶ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 122; Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 156-159, 217.

passed the resolution, the president handed the Palestine policy over to his largely anti-Zionist State Department, and by March 1948, Truman was even considering a complete reversal in policy that favored the establishment of a trusteeship in Palestine rather than an independent Jewish state.⁵⁷ By his own admission, he was looking at all other possible solutions because at that point it had become clear that, “the partition plan cannot be carried out at this time by peaceful means.”⁵⁸ Palestinian Jewish leaders quickly made it known that such an “amazing reversal” by the Truman administration would neither alter nor hinder their plans to declare independence when the British withdrew in May.⁵⁹ Truman’s last minute decision to extend de facto recognition, therefore, had little to do with an ardent loyalty to Zionism and more to do with simply accepting what was already a fact.⁶⁰ After recognition, he once again handed the Palestine problem back to the State Department.⁶¹

Perhaps the biggest indicator that Truman’s de facto recognition should not be viewed as the benchmark of a lasting U.S.-Israeli special relationship is Truman’s refusal to aid the Jews in any substantive way when Arabs from Palestine and the neighboring states threatened to destroy the Jewish state.⁶² Clashes between Arabs and Jews erupted almost immediately following the

⁵⁷ Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 86-88.

⁵⁸ Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947*, 202-203.

⁵⁹ Alon Kadish, “The ‘Trusteeship’ and the Yishuv’s Military Strategy,” in *Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the Quest for Peace in the Middle East*, ed. by Michael J. Devine (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2009), 67-68.

⁶⁰ Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 26.

⁶¹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 240.

⁶² Ambassador S. Pinkney Tuck (Egypt) to Secretary of State George C. Marshall, December 3, 1947, 867N.01/12-347, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947*, Vol. 5, 1295-1297.

November 29, U.N. vote for partition.⁶³ However, beginning December 5, the State Department imposed an arms embargo against Palestine and the rest of the Middle East to prevent American arms from entering the conflict. Since the British continued to supply the Arabs with arms, Jews and other pro-Zionist supporters objected to the American embargo as “one-sided.”⁶⁴ Pro-Zionists pled with Truman and the State Department to lift the embargo, and even launched a campaign in the press to add public pressure, but in this case Truman refused to defy his State Department and order a repeal of the embargo.⁶⁵ Additionally, whenever the provisional government of Israel or its American supporters requested financial aid for the fledgling nation, Truman stalled and even refused to order his Secretary of State to authorize it.⁶⁶ He took the same approach to the Zionists’ requests for *de jure* recognition, a more formal type of recognition that acknowledged the legal legitimacy of Israel and its government, as opposed to the *de facto* recognition, which merely acknowledged that the nation existed.⁶⁷

A true change in the American government’s attitude and policy toward Israel came only after the Jews secured their independence by defeating the Arabs and reaching an armistice agreement with Egypt in January 1949. Suddenly Israel was seen, not only by Truman but also by the State Department, as a strategic asset in the Middle East.⁶⁸ The Jews were granted a loan of \$100 million and

⁶³ Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 153-157.

⁶⁴ Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 257.

⁶⁵ Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, 318-323; For more on Truman’s non-intervention, see Shlomo Sonim, “The 1948 American Embargo on Arms to Palestine,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 94, no. 3 (Autumn, 1979), 509-510.

⁶⁶ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 241, Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, 324.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 241.

⁶⁸ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 270-271.

given de jure recognition in January 1949, and the arms embargo was ultimately lifted after the final peace agreement between Israel and its neighbors was signed.

Since a real change in the U.S. government's attitude and policy toward Israel—full diplomatic support, perception as a strategic asset, financial assistance, and ultimately military aid—did not begin until after Israel secured its independence through war, it is the Jewish military victory over the Arabs, not Truman's de facto recognition, that best serves as a starting point for a uniformed and lasting pro-Israel policy in the United States. In this respect, a lesser-known group of Americans who contributed to Israel's victory in the First Arab-Israeli War emerges as a significant factor in the development of a pro-Israel U.S. foreign policy.

While Zionists in New York and Washington were making short-term gains by pushing Truman into their corner on specific issues, either through humanitarian pleas or political pressure, an underground Zionist movement was working on a mission that would ultimately affect the outcome of the war and the long-term foreign policy of the United States. From the fall of 1947 through 1948, men and women from all around the country covertly assembled an arsenal of arms and ammunition for the Jewish armed forces. It was a silent movement often performed with as little trace or paper trail as possible in order to evade detection and legal culpability. The State Department used the Neutrality Act and Export Control Act as the legal basis for enforcing its arms embargo, and imposed laws that made it illegal to transport—or even conspire to transport—weapons and other implements of war out of the United States and into Palestine. Yet, despite attempts made by the State Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Customs Bureau to prevent the subversive activity from occurring and prosecute anyone involved, the underground Zionists successfully managed to

smuggle planes and munitions out of the country and into Israel where they made a decisive contribution to the outcome of the war.⁶⁹

While many scholars of early U.S.-Israel relations touch briefly on the arms smuggling effort, and a handful of historians have even undertaken the arduous task of uncovering the details of the shrouded activity, no historians have connected the contributions of that movement to the beginning of a long-standing American policy that has provided Israel with constant diplomatic, financial, and military support. This work is designed to fill that void—to place American Zionist arms procurement as one of the most important factors that shaped the attitude and foreign policy views of both the president and the State Department, and thus set American policy on its current trajectory.

Chapter one of the thesis details the United States government's postwar liquidation process through which planes, munitions, and other military supplies were made available for private purchase. The chapter also addresses how the State Department and other agencies attempted to restrict or terminate the sale of military equipment in response to changing conditions in Palestine and a growing concern about homegrown smuggling efforts. Chapters two and three share two interconnected stories of an underground arms procurement and smuggling ring that operated out of California between the fall of 1947 and the spring of 1948. Finally, the conclusion sheds light on how these activities contributed to Israel's victory, and how in doing so they altered Washington's perception of Israel in a way that gave rise to an enduring "special relationship."

⁶⁹ A. Joseph Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974, 197.

CHAPTER 2: SURPLUS SALE—POLICY, PROCUREMENT, AND THE PALESTINE PROBLEM

When World War II came to a close, the United States faced a multitude of challenges both at home and abroad. The war left much of Europe in ruins and the United States had to help rebuild infrastructures, economies, and even governments. Displaced persons numbering in the hundreds of thousands were consigned to overcrowded refugee camps and were in desperate need of repatriation or relocation. The United Nations came into existence at nearly the same time as the nuclear age and needed American support to gain legitimacy as the world's peacekeeping authority.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, cultural, territorial, and political tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union grew into what political scientists call a "security dilemma," in which each nation believed that an increase to the security of one state meant a decrease to the security of the other.⁷¹ It was the beginning of the Cold War.

Simultaneously, there were domestic issues to deal with after the war. In April 1945, shortly after beginning a fourth term, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died and left the American people without their leader of the prior twelve years. The tactical New York politician was succeeded by his shoot-from-the-hip Missourian vice president, Harry S. Truman. After only four and a half months as second in command, Truman was suddenly in charge of the most powerful country in the world at an uncertain moment in history. His immediate aim was to bring the war to an end, then transition the nation to a peacetime

⁷⁰ David Schoenbaum, *The United States and the State of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36.

⁷¹ Warren I. Cohen, *The New Cambridge History of Foreign Relations: Challenges to American Primacy, 1945 to Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22-23, 28-29.

economy and balance the budget. Within six months of Truman taking office World War II ended. Economic reconversion and shrinking the deficit then became front-and-center concerns in Washington.

The amount of government spending and national debt had increased dramatically over the course of the war. Expenditures increased more than ten fold, from \$9 billion in 1940 to nearly \$100 billion in 1945. In total \$290 billion dollars was spent during that timeframe, and in fiscal year 1945 alone, nearly ninety percent of federal expenditures were war-related. The American government and the American people were saddled with the largest debt-to-GDP-ratio in the nation's history.⁷²

In an attempt to curb spending and balance the budget, Truman and Congress made aggressive cuts over the next two years. By 1947, expenditures were down to \$42.5 billion with receipts of \$43.2 billion that year. It was the first year since 1930 that the U.S. government operated in the black.⁷³

With mass demobilization of the armed forces came big budget cuts to military spending and the termination of several military programs, but the United States still had an interest in keeping its defense apparatus strong in order to check the power of potential enemies.⁷⁴ As Truman pointed out in his address to

⁷² Matt Phillips, "The Long Story of U.S. Debt, From 1790 to 2011, in 1 Little Chart," *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/11/the-long-story-of-us-debt-from-1790-to-2011-in-1-little-chart/265185/>, accessed October 3, 2017; Harry S. Truman, "Message to the Congress on the State of the Union and on the Budget for 1947," January 21, 1946. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1460>.

⁷³ Harry S. Truman, "Annual Budget Message to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1949," January 12, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1362>.

⁷⁴ Harry S. Truman, "Message to the Congress on the State of the Union and on the Budget for 1947," January 21, 1946. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1460>.

Congress on January 21, 1946, “We still have the task of clinching the victories we have won.”⁷⁵ Truman determined that securing those gains required maintaining an edge in weapons technology. Military leaders widely agreed that the weapons of the last war would not win the next.⁷⁶

A 1945 memorandum produced by the Surplus Property Administration (SPA)—renamed the War Assets Administration in March 1946—concluded that the government needed to replace obsolete World War II materiel in preparedness of facing future threats. In the memo, SPA Administrator W. Stuart Symington, who would later become the first Secretary of the Air Force, wrote of the critical role airpower played in the outcome of World War II, and he insisted that the United States must remain superior in the skies. He warned that the military’s burdensome stock of surplus aircraft could actually “stand in the way of progress.”⁷⁷ The U.S. military needed to develop a more advanced fleet, Symington argued, and for that to happen the old planes would have to go.

This was, in fact, the sole purpose of the SPA. Roosevelt and Congress created the agency through the Surplus Property Act in October 1944, after Roosevelt foresaw that a vast amount of surplus military equipment would be rendered useless after the war. The government needed an agency to take possession of the obsolete equipment from each of the service branches and dispose of it. There were essentially three options for disposal: scrap it, donate it to friendly nations, or sell it. Surprisingly, some argued that scrapping it was a

⁷⁵ Truman, “Message to the Congress on the State of the Union and on the Budget for 1947,” January 21, 1946. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1460>.

⁷⁶ W. Stuart Symington, foreword in *White Elephants With Wings*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), 5.

⁷⁷ Symington, *White Elephants With Wings*, 1.

more favorable option than selling it. According to the author of a December 1944 *Life Magazine* editorial, one “Navy man” suggested that loading the used equipment onto battleships and dumping it all in the middle of the sea would be better than flooding the market, disrupting normal trade channels, and having a deflationary effect on prices.⁷⁸

Selling the surplus property, however, was more in line with Roosevelt’s original plan and he preferred that the materiel be sold to Americans. He believed that selling the items to private American buyers would aid economic reconversion.⁷⁹ President Roosevelt anticipated the economic challenges that lay ahead when he delivered his annual budget message in January 1944. “The government owns scores of billions of dollars of raw materials, merchant ships, aircraft, munitions, and a wide variety of other commodities,” he told Congress, and “the disposal of surplus property will have a major impact on the speed and effectiveness of the reconversion of industry and of the reemployment of those released from war service and war production.”⁸⁰ To be sure, there was an added benefit of the program putting a little money back into the government’s coffers, but the main objective was to prepare the economy to absorb those who would suddenly become unemployed after the war.

Roosevelt died before the war ended and left the challenging task of solving unemployment and other economic problems to his successor, and those problems mounted quickly. The men and women suddenly rendered jobless after World

⁷⁸ Editorial, “Surplus Property: Must a Great Chance to Broaden Economic Freedom Go By Political Default?” *Life Magazine*, December 18, 1944, 20.

⁷⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Statement on Signing the Surplus Property Act of 1944, October 3, 1944. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16567>.

⁸⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Annual Budget Message, January 10, 1944. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16507>.

War II numbered in the millions almost immediately. By the end of 1945, the military discharged six million soldiers. Another five million Americans lost their war production jobs.⁸¹ In light of this, President Truman welcomed the idea of using the surplus liquidation program as an economic stimulus, and the possibility of adding extra receipts to help rein in the postwar budget enticed him even further. Heading into 1946, he gauged military surplus assets to be valued somewhere in the range of \$50 billion.⁸² None of it was doing the government or the economy any good collecting dust in warehouses and dirt lots. Worse yet, it actually cost the government money just to store, move, and manage it all.

Truman set a goal of recouping “10 to 15 cents on each dollar” through the SPA program.⁸³ Although fifteen cents on the dollar was a far cry from the original costs of production, the receipts helped alleviate some of the postwar budgetary concerns and enabled the government to pursue upgrades to its weapons and aircraft. Resale prices had to be kept low in order to unload as much inventory as possible. Additionally, government officials hoped that low prices would incentivize private citizens to purchase equipment and repurpose it for commercial use.

American businesses and individuals began buying surplus items the moment the SPA started selling them. Truman was pleased with the immediate results and saw promise in the program as receipts started pouring in. By the end of 1945, the SPA had disposed of nearly \$2.3 billion worth of surplus materiel,

⁸¹ Harry S. Truman, “Message to the Congress on the State of the Union and on the Budget for 1947,” January 21, 1946. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1460>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

yielding approximately \$600 million in return. Truman estimated that receipts could potentially reach \$9 billion by June 1947. The program definitely showed a budgetary upside.⁸⁴

There were, however, some obvious risks attached to selling surplus military equipment. After all, once the war materiel was sold into the private sector it became very difficult for the government to control its movement and its use. The SPA apprised the President and Congress about the potential abuses that could result from the sale of surplus planes. "Great care must be taken in disposal," the agency's memorandum warned, "to make surplus aircraft a positive instrument for the development of American excellence in aviation rather than a destructive force."⁸⁵ SPA officials were well aware that the surplus planes were combat capable and were desired in several parts of the world for that purpose. However, apart from a word of caution, the SPA did little to put a curb on arms trafficking. Their job was to sell the military surplus. The burden of actually protecting against abuses after the items were purchased fell on the State Department, the Customs Bureau, and the FBI.

Throughout the duration of the surplus program, which lasted until 1949, the State Department labored more intensively to keep American arms out of the Middle East than virtually anywhere else in the world. State officials wanted to avoid any military involvement whatsoever in the growing conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews over land, immigration, and sovereignty. There was a general consensus within the department that if American weapons made their

⁸⁴ Harry S. Truman, "Message to the Congress on the State of the Union and on the Budget for 1947," January 21, 1946. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1460>.

⁸⁵ Symington, *White Elephants With Wings*, 1.

way into Palestine it could exacerbate the violence. More than ever before, the United States placed a high strategic value on the Middle East after World War II and wanted to protect its interests by not disrupting relations with the Arabs. The region's oil was highly desirable for American industrial and military use, and its geographic location was important to trade routes and Washington's post-war strategy of containment against Soviet expansionism.⁸⁶ State Department officials wanted to avoid taking sides in the matter. However, since Arabs controlled the majority of the Middle East, the bigger objective within the department—particularly within the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs—was to avoid the appearance of siding with the Jews.⁸⁷

By the time the United States began showing an interest in the Palestinian conflict, the territorial struggle between Jews and Arabs had been festering for two decades. Initially starting with occasional small-scale skirmishes in the 1920s, the rift between the two sides had worsened to a boiling point by the late 1940s. Jews considered the land of Palestine to be their ancestral home, and a large contingent of the Jewish population—known as Zionists—wanted to establish a homeland in

⁸⁶ Dan Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement with the Palestine Problem* (Los Angeles: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 243.

⁸⁷ Evidence of a State Department bias appears in the reasoning officials used to implement an arms embargo against Palestine in November/December 1947. In a November 10, 1947 memorandum from the Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs, Loy Henderson, to Secretary of State George Marshall, Henderson admits that “from time to time” the department received requests for arms and ammunition from Arab governments, but it was only after he “expected that the Jewish Agency or other Jewish organizations will make similar requests in the near future,” that Henderson proposed an arms embargo against Palestine and the “neighboring countries.” Marshall issued an embargo on December 5. A telegram from Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett to Marshall on December 6 used similar language. Lovett identified “recent disorder [in] Palestine and threats from Arab states,” but suggested the secretary turn away “representatives [of the] Jewish Agency who are also representatives of [the] Zionist Organization of America” when they request the government to permit the “export to Palestine from US of military supplies.” Henderson to Marshall, November 10, 1947, 867N.01/11-1047, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 1249; Lovett to Marshall, December 6, 1947, 501.BB Palestine/12-647, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Vol. 5*, 1300.

the territory to provide a safe haven from the types of state-driven anti-Semitism many of the remnant had either experienced in the pogroms of Russia or in the Nazi Holocaust. Zionism served the best interest of many Jewish people—especially those in Europe who were displaced and still reeling from the effects of genocide—but as Jews immigrated into Palestine they encountered resistance from the Arabs, who viewed Zionism as a threat to their security. This placed the British government, which held responsibility for governing Palestine, in a difficult situation.

Historically, the United Kingdom had been a friend to Zionism. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration established a British foreign policy that supported a Jewish national home in Palestine. The United States followed suit when President Woodrow Wilson embraced the declaration the following year. However, World War II was a game changer in how the West viewed the Middle East, and British government officials shifted their policy away from Zionism to maintain favorable relations with the oil-controlling Arabs.⁸⁸

Great Britain's reversal from Zionism took shape with the White Paper of 1939, which restricted Jewish immigration and land purchases in Palestine.⁸⁹ Jewish opposition to the White Paper resulted in violent clashes between Jewish paramilitary forces and British troops. The U.S. government watched the situation closely. State Department officials were inclined to side with Britain. They saw the political implications of mass immigration. If the Jews eventually achieved a majority, the indigenous Arabs could ultimately end up under Jewish rule against

⁸⁸ Evan M. Wilson, *A Calculated Risk: The U.S. Decision to Recognize Israel* (Cincinnati: Clerisy Press, 2008), 61-63.

⁸⁹ Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 14-15.

their will.⁹⁰ Truman, however, believed that immigration and political Zionism were separate issues, and thought that by addressing the immediate needs of the Jewish refugees, he would in fact release a pressure valve on Zionist aspirations for Jewish statehood.

Early into his presidency, Truman became deeply affected by the plight of Jewish refugees in Europe—also termed Displaced Persons or “D.P.s.” He expressed his disagreement with the White Paper policy almost immediately after taking office. He first broached the matter in a conversation with Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945. Churchill, however, was on his way out and Clement Attlee was set to replace him later that month. Truman then took the issue up with Attlee via a letter in August. Truman urged Attlee to lift the White Paper and allow the immediate relocation of a hundred thousand Jews into Palestine. Truman’s view was shaped in large part by a report submitted to him by Earl G. Harrison, who visited thirty Allied D.P. camps at the president’s request. Harrison’s report was hard-hitting. “As of now, we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them,” Harrison wrote. “One is led to wonder whether the German people, seeing this, are not supposing that we are following or at least condoning Nazi policy.”⁹¹

Truman attached a copy of Harrison’s report to the Attlee letter and also sent a copy to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served as the military governor in the American zone of occupied Germany after the war. Truman’s letter to Eisenhower instructed him to “clean up the conditions mentioned in the

⁹⁰ Judis, *Genesis*, 224.

⁹¹ Harry S. Truman to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, August 31, 1945. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=161>.

report.”⁹² Eisenhower followed Truman’s instructions immediately. Attlee, however, did not agree with Truman on the Palestine issue and refused to relax the White Paper’s immigration restrictions. A few months later, Truman applied pressure by disclosing the contents of the Attlee letter to the American press.⁹³

Truman’s stance on Jewish immigration to Palestine caused strains both in British-American relations and State Department-White House relations. The president defied the State Department when he involved the United States in the Palestine problem. Worse yet, when it failed to result in changes to British policy, Truman aggravated the issue by taking it to the press. The British, meanwhile, stood firm in their concessions to Arab demands so Truman backed off, opting not to push the issue too hard. Instead, the United States and the United Kingdom agreed to engage in a joint examination of the D.P. situation in hopes of reaching a consensus. The resultant Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry conducted an analysis of the refugee problem in early 1946.

The committee report recommended, among other things, that a hundred thousand visas be granted to Jewish D.P.s who desired to relocate to Palestine. Truman pledged logistical and financial support for the relocation process. Prime Minister Attlee, however, still refused to comply with the committee’s visa recommendation until all other recommendations in the report, including the implementation of a trusteeship, were also in place. The British deemed that a separate committee was then needed in order to determine how the Anglo-American Committee’s proposed solution could be implemented. The additional

⁹² Harry S. Truman to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, August 31, 1945. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=161_

⁹³ Harry S. Truman to Clement Attlee, August 31, 1945. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum. <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=481>.

step imposed yet another delay to opening Palestine's borders to increased Jewish immigration.

Ultimately, the British government determined that in order for a hundred thousand visas to be granted the United States would need to commit troops to Palestine to quash an Arab uprising should one occur. This was not an option for Truman. America's postwar military force was depleted and spread thin throughout Europe and Asia. The president refused to commit American soldiers to Palestine. The committee's plan also failed to garner approval from either side—Arabs or Jews—because it called for a trusteeship over Palestine rather than independence from Western influence. Both the Arabs and the Jews wanted sovereignty in Palestine. Without Arab and Jewish support, the committee's plan died on the spot.

Beyond the infighting between Jews and Arabs and the diplomatic tension between the United States and Great Britain, there was a deeper geopolitical implication to the fate of Palestine. While the American and British governments fumbled through one plan after another, the Soviet Union loomed in the periphery, poised to propagandize American and British policies to turn either the Jews or the Arabs—or both—against the western powers. Truman was well aware that the Arabs would reject any solution that led to a Jewish state, and the Jews would oppose any solution that did not.⁹⁴ He advocated for the right of Jews to immigrate to Palestine and build a home there, but he also wanted to find a permanent solution that accommodated the needs of both Arabs and Jews. His hopes of pleasing both groups came to an end in 1947, after Great Britain handed the Palestine problem over to the United Nations and a two-state solution came

⁹⁴ Intelligence Report of the U.S. Central Intelligence Group, May 23, 1947, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R000600310010-4.pdf>

before the General Assembly for a vote. This boxed Truman into a corner on the Jewish state issue and forced him to alienate either the Jews or the Arabs with his decision. In either case there existed a risk that the alienated group would turn to Russia for support. Ultimately, Truman chose to support the majority plan and back partition because the United States had a vested interest in seeing the U.N. assume an authoritative position in world affairs.⁹⁵

By late 1947, the threat of Soviet interference in the Middle East was a central concern for U.S. military and intelligence officials. In October, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a report to Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, warning him of the “grave danger” the United States would face in the Middle East if the administration supported the U.N.’s partition plan to grant Jews sovereignty over a section of Palestine. “As a consequence,” the report stated, “the USSR might replace the United States and Great Britain in influence and power throughout the area.”⁹⁶ The Joint Chiefs added that if U.S. policy caused the Arabs to turn to the Soviets, it would “have the same impact on United States security and strategic interests in many respects as would military conquest of this area by the USSR.”⁹⁷ Soviet expansionism was perceived as a threat to democracy, international cooperation, and the American way of life.

The possibility of communist expansion into the Middle East was not the only concern floating around Washington. A major concern was losing access to oil reserves if the Arabs, especially the Saudis, became incensed enough by

⁹⁵ Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 244-248; Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 156-158.

⁹⁶ “Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense,” 10 October 1947, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, RG 218, Box 044.

⁹⁷ “Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense,” 10 October 1947, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, RG 218, Box 044.

American support for partition to revoke U.S. oil concessions. The Joint Chiefs believed that supporting a Jewish state in the face of Arab opposition would “gravely prejudice access by the United States to the oil of Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.” There were huge commercial losses at stake, but the Joint Chiefs were far more concerned about the military implications of losing access to oil. “A great part of our military strength is based on oil,” the Joint Chiefs wrote, and an “oil-starved war...would prevent the United States [from] bringing to bear its maximum potential against the USSR.”⁹⁸ Access to Middle Eastern oil was viewed as a key component to the balance of power in the postwar world

On November 28, 1947, just one day before the U.N. General Assembly voted on the partition resolution, the newly created Central Intelligence Agency issued a report titled, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine.”⁹⁹ The CIA warned that supporting the partition initiative severely damaged America’s reputation in the Middle East. If the General Assembly passed the partition plan and it was imposed on Palestine, the surrounding Arab governments might “refuse to sign pipeline conventions, oil concessions, civil air agreements, and trade pacts.”¹⁰⁰ Such a fault line between America and the Middle East would be detrimental to both parties. Not only would it disadvantage American interests, but removing the United States as a revenue source would cause Arab economies to recede into a state of “poverty, unrest, and hopelessness upon which Communist

⁹⁸ Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, October 10, 1947; Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218, Box 044; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁹⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” November 28, 1947. Online at Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003000180001-8.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” November 28, 1947, 1-2. Online at Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003000180001-8.pdf>.

propaganda thrives.” The “dangerous potentialities of such a development to US-Arab and US-USSR relations need no emphasis.”¹⁰¹ The report validated concerns long-held within the State Department.

Nonetheless, with Truman’s backing, the United Nations General Assembly voted to accept the partition solution, and as anticipated the situation became even more agitated in the Middle East. William Eddy, a former U.S. Marine colonel, intelligence man, and key player in developing U.S.-Arab relations during the Roosevelt administration, was serving as a consultant to the Saudi-based Arab American Oil Company at the time. He maintained close ties to the American intelligence community and often corresponded with officials about dealings in the Middle East. In December 1947, he drafted a report painting a very similar picture to the CIA’s report from the previous month. He sent a copy to the Joint Chiefs. “The prestige of the United States government among the Arabs has practically vanished,” he wrote. “Popular Arab resentment against the United States is at present greater than fear or dislike of the U.S.S.R.” He added that the Soviets, being “wholly opportunist,” appeared to be “more accessible to a deal whereby they might be induced to protect the Arabs of Palestine in exchange for air bases and warm water ports, which could be opened to them by the Arab League.”¹⁰² The idea of losing oil and political influence in the Middle East caused consternation among many U.S. government officials.

After the partition vote, Truman and the State Department went into damage control. They attempted to smooth over relations with the Arab world by

¹⁰¹ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” November 28, 1947, 1-2. Online at Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003000180001-8.pdf>.

¹⁰² William Eddy to General Alfred Gruenther c/o JCS, January 5, 1948; Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, RG 218, Box 044; NARA—College Park.

asserting that the United States was not implementing a new policy against the Arabs, but was instead simply remaining consistent with its longstanding policy of protecting the rights of Jews who desired to return to Palestine.

Truman wrote a letter to Saudi King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud to express his sympathies toward the Arab position, but he explained that the United States had long been a proponent of a Jewish Homeland in Palestine. He reassured the king, however, that U.S. policy was in no way intended to be prejudicial toward Arabs. “The Government and the people of this country desire that the fundamental rights of both the Arab and Jewish population of Palestine shall be fully safeguarded,” he wrote, and it was the desire of the United States to “maintain and strengthen our feelings of friendship toward you and the people of Saudi Arabia and toward the rulers and peoples of all Arab lands.”¹⁰³ Truman’s attempt to quell Arab fears after provoking them in the first place was a straddling move reminiscent of his predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt.¹⁰⁴

Despite Truman’s best intentions, supporting a Jewish homeland in Palestine caused considerable damage to America’s reputation as an endorser of self-determination. If the United States followed diplomatic support with military support in any way, the damage to U.S.-Arab relations would have been irreparable. For that reason, the loose ends in the War Assets Administration’s liquidation process presented a major diplomatic problem. This prompted the State Department’s arms embargo on Palestine and the rest of the Middle East to

¹⁰³ Harry S. Truman to the King of Saudi Arabia, January 24, 1947, 867N.01/1-1747, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947*, Vol. 5, 1011-1012.

¹⁰⁴ Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947*, x.

keep American arms and ammunition from entering the conflict and influencing its outcome in favor of one side or the other.¹⁰⁵

The State Department viewed the War Assets Administration as a liability to national security. However, the Jewish Agency for Palestine—the top Jewish civil administration—saw the WAA as a critical source of desperately needed military equipment for waging war against the Arabs. While representatives of the Jewish Agency appealed to Washington officials to repeal the arms embargo, it hedged its bets by simultaneously embarking on an elaborate procurement operation in the United States, Europe, and Africa. In the United States, federal agencies such as the State Department, Customs Bureau, and FBI, attempted to restrict the access and mobility of American war materiel, but it was a daunting task. The WAA surplus program created an arms-purchasing frenzy in the United States as individuals and companies bought large stocks of weapons, ammunition, and transport crafts for the purpose of resale and export, and federal agencies scrambled to control it.¹⁰⁶

On January 13, 1948, the State Department received information that many shipments of arms destined for Palestine had already left the United States undetected.¹⁰⁷ A week later, the State Department Policy Planning Staff determined that the Jews in Palestine would continue seeking weapons in the United States, by either legitimate or illegitimate means, because “without outside

¹⁰⁵ “U.S. Embargoes Arms to Mid-East and Bars Passports for Fighters,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1947.

¹⁰⁶ Several hundred documents and pieces of correspondence concerning arms procurement and attempts to export items out of the United States between May 1947 and October 1949 can be found in General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, Armament Control, Boxes 3153-3158; NARA—College Park.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum of American Vice Consul Hugh Everett Russell, January 13, 1948; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, Box 14; NARA—College Park.

assistance the proposed Jewish state cannot be established or exist.”¹⁰⁸ The State Department took the position at that time that in order to preserve its strategic interests in the Arab world, the U.S. government should “maintain and enforce our embargo on arms to Palestine,” and “take no further initiative in implementing or aiding partition.”¹⁰⁹ With the fate of the Jewish state hanging in the balance, American Jews used the WAA to build a military adequately equipped for war.

Initially, the procurement operation did not include any efforts to obtain airplanes. Even if they could get their hands on a plane or two, operating them required pilots, training facilities, repair shops, airstrips, and weather stations—amenities that were harder to come by than the planes. When a young man from Connecticut named Al Schwimmer first proposed the idea to the agency, he was graciously turned away. Instead, the procurement operation focused on buying small arms, ammunition, and explosives.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, in Palestine, the British government policed Jewish activity to restrict Jewish immigration and militarization. The Jews were determined to strengthen their militia in spite of British intervention, and some paramilitary organizations conducted acts of terrorism against British troops and holdings to weaken the resolve of the officers and soldiers tasked with enforcing British policies. The British had long employed a tight naval blockade to prevent illegal immigration and in 1947, were regularly conducting raids to disrupt Jewish

¹⁰⁸ Report by the Policy Planning Staff on Position of the United States with Respect to Palestine, January 19, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 546-554.

¹⁰⁹ Report by the Policy Planning Staff on Position of the United States with Respect to Palestine, January 19, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948, Vol. 5*, 546-554.

¹¹⁰ Leonard Slater, *The Pledge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 141-144; Jeffrey Weiss and Craig Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Military Academy, 1998), 99-100.

paramilitary operations and seize their weapons.¹¹¹ The blockade against immigration also made it extremely difficult to smuggle small arms and ammunition into Palestine. For that reason, smuggling a large plane into Palestine seemed out of the question.

That changed on September 25, 1947. Having grown weary of the Arab-Jewish conflict and facing pressures from both its military officials in Palestine and Britons at home to get out of the mandate, the British government announced it would comply with the U.N. Special Committee's recommendation of partition and begin withdrawing its troops from Palestine.¹¹² This made three things certain: the British were leaving, partition was imminent, and a violent war between the Arabs and the Jews was only a matter of months away. The Palestinian Arabs declared their intentions to go to war in an 8,000-word statement delivered before the U.N. Special Committee on September 30. The statement outlined Arab policy as "no partition, no further Jewish immigration and no Jewish state." Any attempt to impose a Jewish state on the Arabs would lead them to drench the Holy Land "with the last drop of our blood in the lawful defense of all and every inch of it."¹¹³

Zionists, therefore, answered Secretary Marshall's announcement of the U.S. arms embargo with mass protest. The Brooklyn division of the American Jewish Congress presented a petition to the State Department with 160,000 signatures calling for the abolition of the arms embargo. Editorials in the press called for the United Nations to demand that the United States repeal its embargo

¹¹¹ Julian Lewis Meltzer, "Palestine Taxed For \$1,000,000 Fire," *New York Times*, April 1, 1947.

¹¹² Clifton Daniel, "British Exit Reports Heard," *New York Times*, September 26, 1947.

¹¹³ Thomas J. Hamilton, "Palestinian Arabs Reject U.N. Plans; Warn of a Battle," *New York Times*, September 30, 1947.

immediately and allow the arming of Jews to defend the General Assembly's partition decision. Many prominent, pro-Zionist politicians and government officials also advocated for the removal of the embargo.¹¹⁴ From their perspective—since the British government insisted on maintaining its arms deals with Arab nations who openly expressed violent intentions toward the Jewish state—the American embargo against Palestine amounted to a policy that was “practically militating against the Jewish cause.”¹¹⁵ Yet despite the appeals, Truman sided with his State Department on the issue, and not just in acquiescence. He actually agreed with the embargo.¹¹⁶ Truman wanted a peaceful settlement to the hostilities and feared that the entry of American arms would exacerbate the problem and would, therefore, necessitate a commitment of American troops to enforce partition.

Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Transjordan, and Egypt pledged military support to the Palestinian Arabs. Already well equipped prior to World War II, the Arab nations further ramped up their defenses after the war by acquiring arms from military dumps and Allied surplus stocks. Beyond adequate stocks of small arms, the Arab coalition possessed armored trucks, tractors, light tanks, a small navy, and a fleet of planes.¹¹⁷

The Jews on the other hand received no such offers of military or financial support from the United States or other nations. They too procured weapons and

¹¹⁴ Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, 319-323.

¹¹⁵ Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, 318; Richard Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 189.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 174-176.

¹¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” November 28, 1947, 1-2. Online at Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003000180001-8.pdf>.

ammunition from wherever possible, and although the far-reaching procurement efforts had resulted in a stockpile of small arms, the CIA estimated it was “doubtful whether the amount of ammunition they have on hand will be sufficient for a long campaign.”¹¹⁸ From the outside looking in, the Jews were at a disadvantage against the Arabs because, according to U.S. intelligence operatives, the Arabs’ fighting style, communication network, manpower, and access to war materiel was greater than that of the Jews.

Leading up to Jewish independence, therefore, American intelligence had determined that the Jews would put up a good fight early on but the Arabs would eventually wear them down and defeat them. The anticipated “war of attrition against the Jews,” would “wear the Zionist economy to the breaking point,” unless “large numbers of immigrants and substantial material assistance are supplied from abroad.”¹¹⁹ With no support pledged from other governments, the Jewish Agency for Palestine had little choice but to look to the global Jewish community—and especially American Jewry—to provide what was needed for their war of independence. It would be the American people rather than the American government that would rally to their aid.

¹¹⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” November 28, 1947, 13. Online at Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003000180001-8.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” 28 November 1947, 1-2.

CHAPTER 3: THE SKY IS THE LIMIT—PLANES INTO PALESTINE

It was late fall 1947, when the Jewish Agency for Palestine decided they needed to form some version of an air force if they were to have any shot at defeating the Arabs. Arab armies from Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia were already mobilizing, and within just a couple weeks they would be stationed along the Palestine border awaiting the British withdrawal. The Jews needed to prepare for a “life or death showdown.”¹²⁰ The New York office of the Jewish Agency phoned Adolph “Al” Schwimmer, the young man from Connecticut who earlier in the year had pitched the idea of building a Jewish air force. They were ready to implement his plan.¹²¹

Though he lived in Connecticut, Al Schwimmer’s personality more closely reflected his Brooklyn roots, where he was born in 1917. He had a no-nonsense air about him. He could be quiet and unassuming at times but it was often because he was thinking, listening, processing what others had to say and carefully calculating his own words before he spoke.¹²² At just thirty years old, he exuded confidence well beyond his years. He was a seasoned aviator. He logged countless hours and thousands of miles aboard transport aircrafts as a flight engineer during World War II and as an employee of TWA in the years after.¹²³

¹²⁰ United Press, “Three Nations’ Armies Mass Outside Palestine,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1947; United Press, “Jewish Forces Rush to Meet Arab Threat,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1947.

¹²¹ Leonard Slater, *The Pledge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 142-143; Robert Gandt, *Angels In The Sky: How a Band of Volunteer Airmen Saved the New State of Israel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 8-10.

¹²² Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 8; Jeffrey Weiss and Craig Weiss, *I Am My Brother’s Keeper* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military Academy, 1998), 80.

¹²³ Gandt, *Angels in the Sky*, 9.

The Jewish Agency valued Schwimmer's determination and entrusted him to head up the plane procurement division. They gave him some cash to get started and asked him to fly to California to purchase planes and parts from surplus stockyards on the West Coast and in Hawaii. The U.S. Army declared several Lockheed C-69 Constellation transport planes surplus stock and subsequently turned them over to the War Assets Administration for disposal. They were held at the Lockheed Air Terminal in Burbank.¹²⁴ Schwimmer acted without hesitation. He immediately quit his job, readied himself for the trip, and convinced his friend, Ray Selk, a former flight mechanic in the U.S. Army Air Corps, to join him on the endeavor. The two departed for the West Coast in early December to set up shop.¹²⁵

Schwimmer and Selk had to act quickly in order to secure the best available surplus planes at the best possible price, overhaul them, and deliver them to Palestine in time for the war against the Arabs. The State Department's arms embargo on Palestine and the Middle East complicated their mission, but it was an obstacle they felt confident they could circumvent. It essentially required them to export the planes to a different country first, and then reroute them to Palestine once they were off the U.S. government's radar. Meanwhile, a bigger potential obstacle was in the works that neither Schwimmer nor his Jewish Agency contacts knew about at the time, and dodging it also depended on speed of action.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Lockheed Air Terminal is now the Bob Hope Airport.

¹²⁵ Slater, *The Pledge*, 141-144; Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 80.

¹²⁶ "World News Summarized: Saturday, December 6, 1947," *New York Times*, December 6, 1947, 1; "The United States and the Recognition of Israel: A Chronology." Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/israel/palestin.htm>.

As Schwimmer and Selk embarked on their procurement mission, the State Department and the Department of Defense were exploring options to completely shut down the sale of *any* surplus items that could be refurbished, reconverted, and otherwise returned to functional capacity as implements of war. The liquidation of U.S. military surplus contributed to a global arms race that was taking place as foreign entities sought to ramp up their defenses by purchasing military assets at a discount rate. The weapons market created a speculative opportunity for American individuals and organizations seeking to profit by purchasing items at a bargain price and reselling them to the highest bidder. In the last six weeks of 1947 alone, the State Department received export requests from all over the world. Ethiopia sought clothing, trucks, armored cars and weapons. The Philippines wanted arms and ammunition. Mexico, Switzerland, Belgium, and China wanted planes. There were reports of arms shipments to Saudi Arabia, planes to Cuba, and American tanks initially sold to Belgium that were reportedly resold to the Soviet Union.¹²⁷ This seemingly uncontrolled flow of American military surplus did not escape the attention of the U.S. government, and several department heads sought to get it under control.

On Christmas Eve, 1947, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal sent an urgent letter to Secretary of State Marshall in which he noted that prior to and during World War II the U.S. government had suffered “considerable embarrassment and expense” as a result of efforts by American organizations and individuals to “sell to foreign purchasers arms, ammunition, and implements of war which had been used in World War I and had been sold by this Government as

¹²⁷ General Records of the Department of State. Record Group 59, Box 3153; 711.00111 Armament Control/11-2647, 11-2847, 12-247, 12-3047; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

scrap.” Forrestal urged Secretary Marshall to begin immediately denying licenses for any such items and to “announce this policy through the press.”¹²⁸ For the Jewish Agency and Schwimmer, the race was on. The government had already placed an embargo on the Middle East and now several officials wanted to close the door on the sale of all implements of war. Schwimmer and his cohort needed to act quickly and cleverly to purchase planes and get them out of the country.

Flying the planes out of the United States first hinged on registering the planes and obtaining flight clearances. To make everything appear legitimate they needed to operate under the guise of a commercial airline. Through the Jewish Agency’s extensive network they reached out to Irving “Swifty” Schindler, owner of Service Airways, Inc., a dormant airline registered in New York that existed merely on paper. Schindler had long held onto hopes of launching the upstart airline but had yet to acquire even a single plane. In the words of Leonard Slater, author of *The Pledge*, Schindler’s airline was just a “dream unrealized, gathering dust in a thin folder of papers” that was tucked in a drawer in his New York apartment.¹²⁹

To Schindler it was an unrealized dream, but to the Jewish Agency, desperately in need of a legitimate organization to front their clandestine operation at the time, Service Airways was perfect. In addition to being the operational banner under which Schwimmer could register his planes, the company could also channel funds to Schwimmer for future purchases. To expedite the procurement process on the West Coast, Schindler made Selk a vice-president of Service

¹²⁸ General Records of the Department of State. RG 59, Box 3153; 711.00111 Armament Control/12-2447; NARA-College Park.

¹²⁹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 221.

Airways, Inc., giving him power of attorney to make purchases on behalf of the company.¹³⁰

As soon as Al Schwimmer arrived in Burbank, he surveyed the surplus stock and picked out the three best Constellations on the grounds. The Lockheed C-69 Constellation was a 50,000-pound, four-engine transport plane, ideal for the arduous task of hauling heavy military supplies. It was also fast—an unusual trait for a transport vessel—with a top speed of 375 miles per hour.¹³¹ Schwimmer wanted to purchase all three but he needed more money to make it happen. He notified his New York contact and soon received a check for \$45,000. The agency instructed him to open an account in California, explaining that more money was coming and more planes were needed. Schwimmer followed his instructions and opened an account at the Bank of America in Hollywood, CA, then made his first three purchases from the War Assets Administration: three C-69s for \$45,000.¹³²

At \$15,000 per Constellation, the price Schwimmer paid was literally pennies on the dollar when compared to what the planes cost brand new. Off the assembly line a Constellation ran nearly \$450,000, so a \$15,000 ticket price was a steal. However, as good a deal as they were, Schwimmer's planes needed a lot of work. They were weathered from racking up miles of use during the war and desperately needed a thorough cleaning after having spent the last two years parked on a dirt lot. A good cleaning and maintenance work, however, was the least of their worries. In order for the planes to be given a commercial designation by the Civil Aeronautics Board—a requirement for obtaining flight clearances—

¹³⁰ Slater, *The Pledge*, 221; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 28.

¹³¹ Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 18.

¹³² Slater, *The Pledge*, 144; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 20.

the military planes would have to undergo major modifications. Schwimmer reported to the Jewish Agency that Lockheed could make the necessary changes at a cost of nearly \$200,000 per plane; an amount he knew would be nearly impossible to muster. The reaction he received from his benefactors confirmed that the costs he quoted were out of range, so he proposed another solution.¹³³

If Schwimmer was given a chance to recruit and maintain a crew, he was sure he could do the work at a fraction of the cost. With the Jewish Agency's approval, Schwimmer began putting together his team, and launched Schwimmer Aviation Services. He hired a team of mechanics and leased hangar space at the Lockheed Air Terminal. By operating in the middle of a busy terminal, Schwimmer was essentially attempting to hide his secret operation in plain sight.¹³⁴

Meanwhile, the money continued to pour into Schwimmer's Hollywood bank account. Shortly after opening his account with the first \$45,000 for the Constellations, Schwimmer kept receiving checks one after another: \$20,000, \$50,000, \$35,000, and \$59,000. Over the course of the operation, the Jewish Agency allocated approximately half a million dollars to Schwimmer for procurement, overhaul, and transportation expenses.¹³⁵

Next on the list for Schwimmer and Selk were several C-46 Curtiss Commandoes. The C-46 was a twin-engine transport vessel with a load capacity of approximately eight tons, giving the Jewish Agency a smaller, less detectable

¹³³ Slater, *The Pledge*, 144; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 19-20.

¹³⁴ Slater, *The Pledge*, 144; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 22.

¹³⁵ Customs Agent Louis Gwinn to U.S. Attorney, Los Angeles, June 29, 1948; General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, Box 3155, 711.00111 Armament Control/7-2348; NARA—College Park; Office of Investigations Files, Los Angeles, Record Group 36, Box 1, 5109; National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest Region (Riverside, CA).

option to the C-69, but still offering plenty of cargo space for smuggling war materiel into Palestine. That was the functional reason the C-46 was ideal for Schwimmer and the Agency. But there was also a financial reason the C-46 was a good option: it was cheap. At just \$5,000 per plane, the C-46 was only a third of the cost of a C-69. At that rate Service Airways could buy the planes in bulk, and having a fleet of C-46s made overhaul and maintenance far more cost effective. Schwimmer and Selk began stockpiling engines and other spare parts that were specifically designed for that model.¹³⁶

In all, the men bought ten C-46 transport planes under the Service Airways banner. However, by early 1948 the federal officials were aware of Schwimmer's Burbank operation and knew it was in some way connected to a Jewish arms smuggling ring based out of New York. Their conclusions were framed when an attempt to smuggle thirty tons of TNT to Palestine from a New Jersey pier was squandered. Customs officials traced the explosives back to the WAA's Long Island customer service center and identified the purchaser as Foundry Associates, Inc., one of the companies the Jewish Agency used to fund Schwimmer's operation. The FBI followed the money to Burbank and had an agent stationed outside Schwimmer's office only eleven days later.

For Schwimmer, nothing changed with the FBI visit. He purposefully ran his operation in the open for this very reason. He needed to plead innocence at all times and ignorance whenever necessary. It was important that he act as though he had nothing to hide. His story to the federal agent was the same story he told his men when he hired them to do the job. Once, when speaking to a mechanic he was recruiting, the mechanic asked what the fleet was for. Schwimmer simply

¹³⁶ Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 22.

told the man, “We’re starting an airline, going to fly refugees out of Europe.”¹³⁷ In a way what he told the man was true. He did intend to use the planes for transporting refugees. Of course he also intended to use the planes for transporting weapons, but of course there was no reason to make that part of the plan public, and there was every reason for him to keep it in the dark.¹³⁸

Having anticipated the authorities might eventually snoop around Lockheed, Schwimmer and Selk intentionally kept their men in the dark. If someone started asking the crew questions, they wanted everyone giving the same answers, which is exactly what Schwimmer did when the agent approached him that January day. He calmly and confidently explained that with support from a Palestinian investor he was starting an airline that would eventually serve the Jewish state after the mandate ended. The purpose of the airline was to transport immigrants and cargo into Palestine and operate as a commercial airline with flights throughout Europe and across the Atlantic. Schwimmer assured agent that everything was aboveboard. He was working on overhauling the planes to meet commercial specs and was coordinating the necessary export licenses through the State Department. In reality he and his Jewish Agency counterparts were looking for any possible means of gaming the system.¹³⁹

By mid-January, the State Department was catching on that Jews were actively procuring American weapons for use in Palestine. The same day that the FBI approached Schwimmer in Los Angeles, a State Department memorandum of conversation regarding arms procurement circulated through American embassies

¹³⁷ Slater, *The Pledge*, 146.

¹³⁸ Slater, *The Pledge*, 146, 168; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 25-26.

¹³⁹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 146, 168-169.

overseas. The memo originated in Birmingham, England, when the vice consul there reported to the London embassy on a conversation he had with an officer of the British Zionist Organization. “Many Jewish shipments of arms and war materials have been sent out of the United States and escaped detection,” the Zionist official had told him. Despite U.S. authorities seizing “several recent consignments of dynamite consigned to Jewish people in Palestine and listed as machinery—‘THERE WILL BE OTHERS TO FOLLOW’ [sic].”¹⁴⁰ The State Department was determined to put a stop to the subversive arms program.

Schwimmer was unaware of the State Department’s growing interest in shutting down the procurement operation, but he knew from his conversation with the federal agent that he and his crew were under the watchful eye of the Bureau. Purchasing planes and parts would be more difficult from that point forward, so he enlisted additional help from people who were, for all intents and purposes, disassociated from him and his company.

One of the men Al Schwimmer recruited was Lou Lenart, a former Marine from California who had served as a fighter pilot during the war. Like many Jewish Americans, he was horrified by the systematic slaughter of the Jewish people in Europe, and was personally affected because his grandmother and several cousins were murdered at Auschwitz. Naturally he could do nothing for those already killed but he was compelled to do something for the survivors. “I felt that the remnants had a right to life and some chance of happiness,” he said.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Hugh Everett Russell, Memorandum of Conversation, January 13, 1948; General Records of the Department of State, Office of Near Eastern Affairs, RG 59, Box 14; NARA—College Park.

¹⁴¹ Lou Lenart, *Above and Beyond*. Digital. Directed by Roberta Grossman. New York: Playmount Productions, 2014.

One night, Lenart attended temple in Hollywood to hear a former British officer who had spent time in Palestine give a speech about the situation there. Following the speech, Lenart approached the man and said, “Look, I know there’s going to be a war there and I’m a fighter pilot and I want to go there,” he told the man. “Well I don’t know anything about it,” the officer replied. The response took Lenart by surprise. The officer had just finished sharing his personal observations of the Jewish struggle for statehood—surely he had to know something about how the Jewish forces were recruiting soldiers. Disappointed, Lenart left the temple with no idea how he could help. Then one day his telephone rang. The man on the other end of the line introduced himself as Al Schwimmer. The British officer from the temple had passed Lenart’s name to the Jewish Agency and from there it reached Schwimmer. Schwimmer explained how he could help.¹⁴²

“I get a phone call on a Sunday morning from Al Schwimmer,” Lenart recalled. “He gave me an envelope with five thousand dollars; sent me down to the War Surplus Administration. At that time the desert was filled with airplanes and if you’re a veteran you can buy one. So the airplane cost to build about a hundred and seventy-five thousand. For five thousand dollars I became owner of a C-46.”¹⁴³ Just like that, Schwimmer had one more person procuring another airplane, and it was all off the books. Schwimmer brought others into the fold the same way. Lenart, however, proved to be a far greater asset than simply the purchaser of a plane. He helped build the Israeli air force, became one of its first

¹⁴² Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 13-15; Lou Lenart, *Above and Beyond*.

¹⁴³ Lou Lenart, *Above and Beyond*.

fighter pilots, and flew several very important missions during the First Arab-Israeli War.¹⁴⁴

By March 1948, Schwimmer's team was busy working on the three C-69 Constellations and ten C-46 Commandoes. They stripped the planes down, removed any military elements, and installed seats and other amenities to make the planes appear commercial. But the Civil Aeronautics Board was cracking down on commercial licenses and implemented strict regulations on the type of fuel injection system that could be used on the Constellations. The requirement added more money—approximately \$80,000 per plane—and more time to the entire operation. Schwimmer and the Jewish Agency could muster the money if they had to, but they could not afford any extra time.¹⁴⁵

FBI agents continued to visit Al Schwimmer's Burbank operation at the Lockheed Air Terminal and made no attempt to hide the fact that they were listening in on certain conversations. Schwimmer and his partner, Ray Selk, continued to act as if they had nothing to hide, but after another run-in with agents in late March, they knew their time was running out. "We can't keep on hiding from the United States Government forever," Schwimmer admitted to Selk. But, he continued, "We can work very quickly. We can outpace them. The federal machine is very big and ponderous and we can always keep ahead of them."¹⁴⁶

Only one Constellation was ready to make a transatlantic flight. In late January, Al Schwimmer and a small flight crew flew the plane cross-country and parked it at an airport in Millville, New Jersey—a planned launching point for

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Slater, *The Pledge*, 225-226.

¹⁴⁶ Slater, *The Pledge*, 248.

their overseas flights. Since the men had no time to make the required changes to the fuel injection system, they sought out other avenues for getting the plane out of the country without a license. Fortunately, Schindler, the head of Service Airways, knew a gentleman who had secured ownership rights to the first intercontinental airline in Panama, Líneas Aéreas de Panama, Sociedad Anónima, or LAPSA for short. By subletting the planes to LAPSA, Schwimmer was able to avoid the Civil Aeronautics Board's rules and regulations.¹⁴⁷

By registering the planes with a Panamanian airline they were no longer considered American planes and therefore no longer needed to meet strict specifications in order to get flight clearances. The other major benefit to operating under Panamanian registry was that the planes were no longer barred from flying to Palestine. However, if the U.S. government caught wind of the operation, it could seize the planes and keep them grounded on U.S. soil, so Schwimmer ordered the immediate departure of the first Constellation. On March 13, 1948, one of Schwimmer's pilots cleared the plane with Customs, and at 4:00 a.m. the next morning he flew the plane and its cargo of spare parts out of New Jersey and down to Panama.¹⁴⁸

Even though the C-69 Constellation cleared the departure with U.S. Customs before takeoff, the act of flying the plane out of the country was still very much illegal. According to Presidential Proclamation 2717 under the Neutrality Act, any plane weighing in excess of 35,000 pounds was considered an implement of war and therefore required a State Department license before it could be

¹⁴⁷ Lawrence J. Epstein, *Americans and the Birth of Israel* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 94; Slater, *The Pledge*, 223-225.

¹⁴⁸ Slater, *The Pledge*, 234; Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 85; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 41.

exported.¹⁴⁹ The Constellation had an empty weight of approximately 50,000 pounds, and therefore needed State Department clearance before it could leave the United States. However, since the operation was already on the government's radar, Schwimmer and Selk could take no chances in applying for a State Department license. Instead, they wittingly violated the Neutrality Act to get the plane out of the country while they could. It was an example of what Schwimmer meant when he told Selk that the federal machine was ponderous and that they could therefore stay ahead of it. There was no system in place that enabled the Customs Bureau to know whether or not a State Department license had been granted for any given flight. Customs agents simply cleared the plane for departure in accordance with their normal procedures. Schwimmer had bet on latency and won. His pilot flew a 50,000-pound plane right through a loophole.

The race against the government and against time itself was picking up pace and intensity. Every plane they purchased was in need of new or overhauled engines to be airworthy for the long journey to the Middle East, so buying the planes was only a piece of the larger procurement operation. The men needed engines, radio equipment, landing gear, wheels, and basically any other replaceable parts. Beyond merely what was needed to make the planes immediately flight-ready, the men needed to stockpile those parts for ongoing maintenance. Selk recruited his cousin, Herman Greenspun, to leave his Las Vegas life behind for a short time and head to Hawaii to purchase several engines, rear blower assemblies, and other spare parts.¹⁵⁰ In March, the men received word

¹⁴⁹ Harry S. Truman, "Proclamation 2717—Enumeration of Arms, Ammunition, and Implements of War," February 14, 1947. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/proclamations/index.php?pid=291&st=2717&st1=>.

¹⁵⁰ Epstein, *Americans and the Birth of Israel*, 105-106; Slater, *The Pledge*, 198.

that the parts were procured and Greenspun had arranged shipment to Los Angeles.¹⁵¹

Meanwhile Schwimmer had other individuals procuring planes and parts throughout California. Many of their recruits were knowledgeable military veterans, like Lou Lenart, who either flew or worked on planes during the war. Not all capable recruits were ex-servicemen, however—nor were they all men for that matter.

Elynor Rudnick was a highly intelligent, fiery twenty-five year old from Bakersfield, California. She may have lacked combat experience but she knew her way around a plane about as well as anyone on Schwimmer's team. When Rudnick was only nineteen years old she worked for Douglas Aircraft in Los Angeles, and then spent time at an airport in Silver Lake. At the young age of twenty-three, she went into business as owner-operator of Bakersfield Air Park.¹⁵²

Ray Selk approached Rudnick and asked her to acquire a C-46 Curtiss Commando from the War Assets Administration. Selk's team needed to gut it for parts. She knew enough about the operation to be onboard, but being the fiery person she was, Rudnick asked Selk what she would get out of the deal. Selk simply replied, "You're working for the cause."¹⁵³ His answer was good enough for her.

Rudnick approached a principal at a local, Bakersfield school district with a proposition. If the principal purchased a C-46 plane from the War Assets

¹⁵¹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 200.

¹⁵² "Affidavit of James Petrini in Opposition to Motion to Consolidate," Records of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of California, Record Group 21, Box 1206; National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest Region (Riverside, CA).

¹⁵³ "Palestine Situation—Recruitment Program," F.B.I. file of Adolph "Al" Schwimmer, July 12, 1949. F.O.I.A. no. E413cdb0f08057b3bb3b7fa82ab2a87fc989cba59_Q304_R325119_D1671557.

Administration for the district's aviation program, Rudnick would generously provide the funds. There was just one caveat. She needed to gut the plane for certain parts. Whatever was left afterward would be turned over to the program for educational use free of charge. The principal agreed to the deal and purchased the plane.¹⁵⁴

The pilot who picked up the plane from the War Assets Administration and flew it to Bakersfield was same pilot who had flown the Constellation to Panama. Selk and one of his mechanics jumped on another plane in Burbank and flew up to Bakersfield. On the flight, Selk gave the mechanic instructions. His job was to dismantle the plane as quickly as possible. If anyone asked him any questions about his business, he was to reply only that he worked directly for Rudnick. He was never to mention the names "Selk" or "Schwimmer" to anyone.¹⁵⁵

After the C-46 landed at Bakersfield Air Park, Rudnick ordered the team of workers to dismantle the flight instruments, flight control surfaces, engines, landing gears, propellers, and hydraulic units. The parts were transported to Rudnick's garage and Selk arranged trucks to drive everything down to Burbank.¹⁵⁶

The State Department realized the government was losing control of its liquidation process. Countless numbers of planes, guns, ammo, explosives and other implements of war were circulating through private channels and it was impossible for the State Department and Customs to stop every arms dealer from smuggling the military equipment out of the country. Discussion in the State

¹⁵⁴ "Palestine Situation—Recruitment Program," F.B.I. file of Adolph "Al" Schwimmer, July 12, 1949.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Department led to the assessment that something needed to change in how these military assets were being sold to the public.

On March 24, an envoy of State Department officials, including Secretary Marshall and Loy Henderson of the Near East division, gathered in President Truman's office to discuss the escalating situation in Palestine and policy issues contributing to it.¹⁵⁷ The discussion led to a new presidential proclamation that would place even further restrictions on war materiel exports.

Then on March 26, 1948, just two days after meeting with Marshall and other State Department officials, President Truman issued Proclamation 2776, which expanded the list of items requiring a State Department license for export. Whereas its predecessor, Proclamation 2717, outlined specific types of aircraft and parts that required a license, Proclamation 2776 placed the export of all planes and plane parts under the control of the State Department. No longer would a State Department export license be required for planes weighing in excess of 35,000 pounds. Now planes of any weight required State Department approval before they could exit the country. The new rules were scheduled to go into effect on April 15. There would be no time to fit the planes with any of the gear acquired by Greenspun or Rudnick. The C-46s needed to clear U.S. airspace before the April 15 deadline. Selk would ship the parts to Panama by sea.¹⁵⁸

From the date of the proclamation to the date it would take effect, Schwimmer and Selk had essentially two weeks to finish their preparations. They

¹⁵⁷ "Daily Appointments of Harry S. Truman," March 24, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/calendar/main.php?currYear=1948&currMonth=3&currDay=24>.

¹⁵⁸ Harry S. Truman, "Proclamation 2776—Enumeration of Arms, Ammunition, and Implements of War," March 26, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/proclamations/index.php?pid=351&st=2776&st1=>.

would end up using every available day.¹⁵⁹ Schwimmer's team of mechanics worked tirelessly to finish getting the planes ready for the trip. They needed to be in good enough operating condition to haul thousands of pounds of equipment to Panama.

The two engines taken from Rudnick's plane in Bakersfield were loaded into the cargo bay of one of the C-46s. As for the engines and rear blower casings that Greenspun shipped from Hawaii, they stayed at the docks where the plan was to load them onto a freighter. Selk hired a customs broker to secure shipping clearances but ran into problems when he used false commercial designations for the engines.

The delay that resulted from the incorrect designations proved costly. The FBI had learned of the procurement operation in Hawaii and sent agents to the scrap yard to find out what was taken and where it was shipped. When they discovered that Greenspun had shipped a large quantity of plane parts and possibly some guns to Los Angeles, the FBI contacted the Customs office in Los Angeles and requested the allocation of agents to the dock to examine the cargo. On April 14, federal agents swarmed the dock and seized the crates just before they were loaded onto a freighter destined for Panama.¹⁶⁰

As the rules of Proclamation 2776 went into effect at midnight, April 15, two of the three Constellations Schwimmer bought with his first purchase were still sitting at the Millville, N.J., airport, held at bay by Customs after being refused State Department licenses. The engines and blower casings from Hawaii,

¹⁵⁹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 253-254; Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 49.

¹⁶⁰ Interview of John Westland by Customs Agent Louis Gwinn, May 4, 1948; General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, Box 3155; 711.00111/7-2348 (Enclosure); NARA—College Park; Interview of Reynold Selk by Customs Agent Louis Gwinn, June 22, 1948; General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, Box 3155; 711.00111/7-2348 (Enclosure); NARA—College Park.

which Greenspun had spent so much time and effort acquiring, were also trapped in the United States. But all ten C-46's in Schwimmer's fleet were out of the country. One had flown directly to Europe earlier in the month. The other nine barely made it out before the proclamation deadline. Four flew out from New Jersey on April 11 and made it safely to Panama. The final five departed Los Angeles on April 14, just hours before the new rules went into effect.¹⁶¹

The five planes that left Burbank shortly before the deadline were loaded with equipment that Schwimmer and Selk were desperate to get out of the country before the opportunity was lost. Unfortunately that left several of the planes loaded as much as five to ten thousand pounds above their maximum load capacity. The incomplete overhaul of the planes in Burbank combined with heavy cargo made for tumultuous flying conditions. The pilots all touched down in Mexico City to rest and refuel for the remaining stretch to Panama. After the planes were refueled they taxied the five planes down the runway. As they were taking off, one of the plane's loads proved more than it could bare. It inched off the runway, failed to lift, and crashed, claiming the lives of both the pilot and the co-pilot. The other pilots grieved the loss of their friends. Each of the men placed money into the wallet of one of their lost comrades and mailed it to his widow back in the United States. A short time later they continued their trek to Panama to carry out the rest of their mission.¹⁶²

Once in Panama, the planes that Schwimmer and his team purchased and repaired for the Jewish Agency had a far greater chance of reaching Palestine. Schwimmer recruited a team of mechanics to leave the United States and finish

¹⁶¹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 252-255; "Palestine Situation—Recruitment Program," F.B.I. file of Adolph "Al" Schwimmer, July 12, 1949.

¹⁶² Slater, *The Pledge*, 252-255.

overhauling the planes. He still chose not to tell any of his mechanics the true intention of the planes and made no mention of their final destination.

Approximately thirty-eight men were recruited to carry on the work overseas. Some accompanied the flight crews to Panama while others took commercial flights directly to Italy where another base of operation had been established. Some of the mechanics never made it out of the United States at all. The FBI had an informant inside Schwimmer Aviation Services who stole documents and provided them to the agency. Using those documents, the FBI compiled a list of names associated with the operation and gave the list to the State Department, which revoked the passports of any men who had not yet left the country.¹⁶³

After the mechanics completed a little more work on the planes, it was finally determined they were in good enough condition to make the flight to Europe. One by one they made their way across the Atlantic, making several stops along the way before reaching Palestine. Often the men donned old military uniforms in an attempt to fool European customs officials and airstrip personnel into thinking the men were part of a U.S. Air Force mission. It worked. On a stop to refuel in Switzerland, an official boarded a C-46 to conduct an inspection and noticed a cargo of small arms aboard the plane. However, after observing that the entire crew was clad in U.S. military uniforms, the inspector asked only about the flight's destination, to which they answered, Rome. He cleared the flight and the men continued on their way.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ "Palestine Situation—Recruitment Program," F.B.I. file of Adolph "Al" Schwimmer, July 12, 1949.

¹⁶⁴ Central Intelligence Agency Report on Clandestine Air Activity, May 1, 1948. Online at Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0001122570>.

After what Schwimmer, Selk, and their entire team of mechanics and pilots went through to assemble a small but stable fleet of planes for the Jewish war effort, the timing of their arrival could not have been any better. The planes began to ferry equipment into Palestine from a makeshift base in Europe immediately after the British withdrew their forces and Israel declared its independence. The Arab coalition was invading Israel with every intention of destroying it. The Arabs, whose strategy was one of intimidation and attrition, were ill prepared to deal with an enemy air force—an air force that did not exist prior to Schwimmer’s planes arriving.¹⁶⁵

Because of Schwimmer’s work, Israel had a fleet of C-46s hauling weapons, ammunition, and even some dismantled ME-109 fighter planes into Palestine from Czechoslovakia, where the Jewish Agency had struck an arms purchasing deal with the Czech government. Czechoslovakia, which had been under Nazi control during much of World War II, was forced to manufacture arms for the German military, including the ME-109, which served as the German air force’s main fighter plane. Following the end of the war, Czechoslovakia was a treasure-trove of surplus. Unlike the United States, the Czech government was willing to sell planes, tanks, guns, and ammo to any bidder—and in fact sold arms to both Arabs and Jews. The Jewish Agency bought from the Czechs in bulk and transported the weapons into Palestine aboard their fleet of American-made planes. The ME-109s were immediately commissioned to conduct bombing raids and engage Egyptian Spitfires that had been strafing and bombing Jewish

¹⁶⁵ Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 85-88.

settlements since the day the British withdrew their forces.¹⁶⁶ Schwimmer's planes not only delivered arms and other munitions from abroad, but also ferried in enough planes for Israel to build its first fighter fleet. In addition to providing the Israelis with the ability to defend attacks from the sky and launch attacks of their own, air transportation was also the most reliable means of moving men and supplies between isolated settlements to reinforce and replenish the troops. Israeli victory depended on its airpower, and that airpower was the product of Al Schwimmer.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Gandt, *Angels In The Sky*, 80; Records of the District Courts of the United States for the Southern District of California, RG 21, Box 1211C, 318; National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest Region (Riverside, CA).

¹⁶⁷ A. Joseph Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974), 81.

CHAPTER 4: HAWAII TO HAIFA—GREENSPUN GETS THE GUNS

In December 1947, Herman “Hank” Greenspun, the spirited thirty-eight-year old attorney turned entrepreneur, was at his home in Boulder City, Nevada, getting ready to launch his new Las Vegas radio station, KRAM. The station’s grand opening was quite an affair. The governor of Nevada would be present for the event, along with several other notable figures.¹⁶⁸

It was no surprise that Greenspun could orchestrate such a well-publicized event. In little more than a year since arriving in Las Vegas, he established himself as one of the city’s most popular publicity figures. In fact, just a few months earlier he was working as a publicity man for the Flamingo, helping the notorious gangster “Bugsy” Siegel build a buzz around his prized hotel and casino. After Siegel was gunned down in June 1947, Greenspun decided to leave the Flamingo and pursue his own business ventures instead. KRAM was one of those ventures. As he prepared for his big launch that winter day, the phone began to ring.¹⁶⁹

The voice on the other end was a familiar one. It was Reynold Selk, Greenspun’s cousin from back east. The timing of the call was unexpected but the call itself was not. Selk had phoned a few weeks earlier and mentioned he was heading out west with a friend, Al Schwimmer. He also mentioned there was a chance he would need a little help along the way. Selk was unusually cryptic in

¹⁶⁸ Herman Greenspun, *Where I Stand: The Record of A Reckless Man* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1966), 73-74; Authors Jeffrey Weiss and Craig Weiss (*I Am My Brother’s Keeper*, Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1998), suggest Greenspun received this recruitment phone call in April 1948, however Greenspun’s record of December 1947 coincides with the timelines later established in FBI and Customs Bureau files.

¹⁶⁹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 68-72; Robert Gandt, *Angels In The Sky: How A Band of Volunteer Airmen Saved The New State of Israel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 54.

that first phone call, but Greenspun decided not to press him for details. On the second call Selk told Greenspun that he had just landed in Las Vegas and was staying in a room at the Last Frontier Hotel. He asked Greenspun to meet him at the hotel as soon as possible. Greenspun jumped in his car and drove to the hotel where he reconnected with his cousin and met Selk's friend, Al Schwimmer, for the first time.¹⁷⁰

Schwimmer did most of the talking and it soon became clear that he was the one who was in charge. He explained that the Jewish Agency for Palestine had recruited him to procure planes and aircraft parts for the Haganah, the main Jewish military force in Palestine. The purpose of the mission was to arm the Jews in preparation war with the Arabs.¹⁷¹ Schwimmer explained that he had extensive experience as a flight engineer and aircraft mechanic. With the help of Selk, whom Greenspun already knew to be a talented aircraft mechanic, Schwimmer would procure airplanes through the War Assets Administration and overhaul them to be battle-ready for the Jews in Palestine.¹⁷² Greenspun listened intently as he wondered how exactly he fit into the equation. He knew relatively nothing about planes and was unsure how helpful he could be in procuring planes and parts. Schwimmer told him not to worry about that. They needed him for the job.

Hank Greenspun's impressive military record was well known to the Jewish Agency, which conducted a thorough vetting process before bringing anyone into the fold about the clandestine procurement operation. Greenspun was a tough and charismatic character, with a hardnosed leadership style. He was an

¹⁷⁰ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 75; Leonard Slater, *The Pledge* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 198.

¹⁷¹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 82.

¹⁷² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 75.

officer in General Patton's Third Army where he operated in the European Theatre and received several commendations and promotions during the course of his service. By the time the war ended and he was discharged in 1945, Greenspun held the rank of major. Schwimmer explained that Greenspun's extensive experience with ordnance equipment—guns, ammo, and explosives—would be helpful since several of the planes were intended to be used in combat once they reached Palestine.¹⁷³

Years later, Hank Greenspun would admit that for a brief moment his conscience wrestled against the responsibilities of his civilian life.¹⁷⁴ But he thought back to a moment three years earlier, when he stood inside a desecrated synagogue in the French city of Nancy, not far from the German border. He watched as the ten remaining Jews in the city—a far cry from the five thousand Jewish families that had lived there before the war—joined American servicemen in the temple for the first observance of Yom Kippur services since 1940. Greenspun noted in his memoirs that as he stood in the “ravaged synagogue” watching the elderly Jews weep in their grief, “I became deeply aware of Jewish responsibility for the fate of all Jews. But awareness wasn't enough,” he explained, “what really mattered was to meet that responsibility when the time came and to take appropriate action.”¹⁷⁵ As Schwimmer stood before him asking for help, he determined that the time had come.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 82; Interview of Herman Greenspun by Special Agent Bryon C. Wheeler, September 29, 1953, FBI File: 1348080-0 - File 4 Section 1, 10; Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 192.

¹⁷⁴ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 82-83.

¹⁷⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 53.

¹⁷⁶ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 83.

The two men explained that their immediate need was for him to rummage through five hundred acres of war surplus material and procure airplane parts and engines from a salvage yard in Hawaii. They would provide a list; he would do the shopping. Greenspun agreed to make the trip and help the cause however he could. He suggested they meet in the morning to go over the details. He was already running late to his own radio station launch party. But Selk and Schwimmer had different plans. They were taking off for Los Angeles immediately and Greenspun needed to join them. His flight to Hawaii was departing later that evening. There was no time to pack, not even time to phone his wife. Selk loaned him some clothes and promised his cousin he would telephone his wife to spare her any worry about where her husband was.¹⁷⁷

Once in Oahu, Greenspun followed his instructions. He located the yard of Universal Aircraft Salvage Corporation and toured the premises. The owner of the surplus yard was Jewish but Greenspun was leery to trust him with any details about the true nature of his visit, so he kept mum until he found the right opportunity to test the waters. As they passed by the furnaces where employees were melting down scrap metal, Greenspun turned to the owner and commented, “Those furnaces, they remind me of Hitler’s ovens.”¹⁷⁸ The look on the owner’s face and the solemn response that followed told Greenspun all he needed to know.

As he surveyed the crates of engines and mounds of loose parts, a feeling of anxiety washed over him. How would he ever make sense of the parts he was there to purchase? Then he saw something that he could make sense of: machine guns. There were hundreds of thirty caliber and fifty caliber aircraft machine guns

¹⁷⁷ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 83-84.

¹⁷⁸ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 87.

piled up in stacks. His instructions said nothing about picking up machine guns on this trip but he knew from his time on the European battlefield that the only way to gain and hold ground was through adequate artillery.¹⁷⁹

Greenspun tried to act casual as he looked over the used guns and was pleased to find that they operated quite smoothly, almost like new. Then he noticed stacks of brand new machine guns and barrels just beyond the limits of the salvage yard. As he eyeballed the nearby cache, he saw a uniformed Marine Corps guard walk by, patrolling the adjacent yard that housed it. He asked the owner about the property next door and the equipment stored on it and learned that the salvage yard was butted right up next to a U.S. naval depot.¹⁸⁰

There was no way he was leaving the island without the surplus machine guns and spare barrels, but he had to find a way to acquire them without having enough money to cover the cost. As for the guns and barrels in the naval yard, those were technically not for sale. That fact, however, only posed a logistical issue for Greenspun, not a financial one, because he immediately decided he would simply steal them. He was, after all, already risking prison time in his efforts to violate the arms embargo, so he might as well do everything in his power to make it count.¹⁸¹ The brand new guns and barrels were just wasting away on an island military yard when they could make a life or death difference for the Jews in Palestine. There was no fence separating the two properties, but the equipment was extremely heavy and two armed guards patrolled the naval yard day and night.

¹⁷⁹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 87-88.

¹⁸⁰ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 88-89.

¹⁸¹ A. Joseph Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974), 94.

Greenspun needed access to the salvage yard during the night hours to have any chance of sneaking the forklift across without being seen.¹⁸²

He decided to take a risk and told the owner of the yard he was on a mission for Haganah, the Jewish army. He mentioned nothing about the guns and barrels so as not to implicate the owner in the Neutrality Act violation. When the owner learned that Greenspun was connected to the Haganah he simply replied, “Take what you need. Forget about the money. It’s all yours.” Greenspun was relieved. At least the cost of the guns and plane parts was solved.¹⁸³

In the dark of night, Greenspun used the forklift to load guns from the salvage yard into crates. But he still needed those guns and barrels on the naval depot lot. He knew from his experience in battle that machine guns were only as good as their barrels, and the barrels were often the first thing to wear down under the immense heat of heavy fire. Spare barrels would keep the guns firing. And those new barrels were in reach since there was no fence separating the two yards. But accessing the cases of materiel proved tricky due to the rotation of armed guards that patrolled the perimeter of the naval depot. Moreover, the cases of barrels were too heavy to simply lift, drag, or push from one yard to the next, so Greenspun needed the forklift to move the equipment across the line. That meant finding the right window of opportunity.¹⁸⁴

As he worked night after night loading up equipment from the salvage yard, he carefully observed the neighboring soldiers’ routine, looking for any gaps in exposure to the small sliver of yard he needed to penetrate. He found one. Every

¹⁸² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 88. Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother’s Keeper*, 193.

¹⁸³ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 89; Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother’s Keeper*, 193.

¹⁸⁴ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 89.

two hours, there was an eight-minute gap in which the Marine guards, who patrolled opposite ends of the yard, were both out of sight and earshot of Greenspun's forklift. When the window of opportunity arose, he began hastily moving the new cases of guns and barrels, one by one, off of the depot lot and into the salvage yard where he then packed them into engine crates.¹⁸⁵

Greenspun was meticulous as he loaded the guns and barrels, measuring out precise quantities that closely matched the total weight of the engine models that were stenciled on the outside of the crates. After filling the crates with guns and barrels, he marked them on the outside with a few brushstrokes of black paint so that when necessary he could easily distinguish them from the rest of the crates that actually held aircraft engines.¹⁸⁶ It was a calculated move that would later aid him in evading customs officials in Los Angeles.

There was still the issue of sorting out which aircraft engines and parts he needed to acquire. That, after all, was the original purpose of his trip. He messaged Schwimmer to send him some resources. He wanted someone with aircraft experience to make sense of all the parts they needed and he asked for just enough money to cover the shipping expenses.¹⁸⁷

Schwimmer responded by sending Willie Sosnow, one of his expert mechanics, to assist Greenspun. He quickly went to work sorting out the engines and parts they needed for the C-46 Curtiss Commando planes that Schwimmer and Selk were acquiring in California.¹⁸⁸ Sosnow was horrified when he found out

¹⁸⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 89-90; Slater, *The Pledge*, 199; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 94.

¹⁸⁶ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 90; Slater, *The Pledge*, 199.

¹⁸⁷ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 89; Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 193.

¹⁸⁸ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 94; Slater, *The Pledge*, 198-199.

about Greenspun's plan for the machine guns. His apprehension intensified one night when, unexpectedly, an employee of the salvage yard drove up in a jeep and saw the men loading a crate full of guns. Greenspun made a spur of the moment attempt to explain their actions, blurting out that the guns were going to a Hollywood studio where they would be used as props in an upcoming film. The explanation was a stretch so Greenspun offered the man two crisp five-dollar bills, which seemed to satisfy his curiosity for the moment. But he returned the next night, and again the night after that, and continued showing up and collecting additional small payoffs in exchange for keeping his mouth shut and helping the men load the remaining guns.¹⁸⁹

The fact that someone else knew about the guns naturally made Sosnow uneasy. He warned Greenspun that the guns were putting their whole aircraft operation in jeopardy.¹⁹⁰ Greenspun was less concerned. Furthermore he was the type of man whose mind was set once he decided on something. One of Greenspun's colleagues told an FBI agent in an interview, "Greenspun is stubborn, obstinate and hard-headed when he has made up his mind to anything" and he "likes to consider himself as the champion of the oppressed and the 'underdog.'"¹⁹¹ Having seen firsthand the devastating effects of the Holocaust in Europe, Greenspun viewed the Jews in Palestine as one of the biggest "underdog" stories in history. Over Sosnow's objections, the guns would be shipped to Los Angeles with the engines and the rest of the parts, end of story.

¹⁸⁹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 199-200.

¹⁹⁰ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 90.

¹⁹¹ FBI Report, Herman Greenspun files, January 10, 1958, E04fcedb005a832d88dc217d99a1f164d1abbbca9_Q595_R318048_D1638964-3, 27.

There was, however, another problem. While Sosnow delivered the much needed aircraft expertise Greenspun had asked for, he still had no money to pay the expensive shipping fee. Greenspun took his problem to the salvage yard's owner, who had already offered up all the equipment free of charge. He told the owner that he was short the money needed for shipping the items but felt confident that if they could just round up a dozen or so Jewish businessmen from around the island, Greenspun could convince them to provide the necessary funds.¹⁹² After all, selling people on desert dreams was how he made his living as a publicity man in Las Vegas. The dream of establishing a Jewish state in their ancestral desert land was one that resonated with many American Jews after the Holocaust. He was sure he could convince them to cover the cost.

The cost of shipping the heavy load of cargo was nearly \$6700, and even though the salvage yard owner had already given Greenspun the equipment free of charge, he offered to pitch in \$1700 cash toward the shipping as well. That left \$5000 to be funded by the local businessmen. The owner made some phone calls and gathered the businessmen for a meeting where he and Greenspun explained that money was needed to ship some very important items back to the mainland. They were unable to give much detail about the operation Greenspun was conducting but the men could be assured that their money would go toward the survival of the Jewish people in Palestine. Within five minutes Greenspun had the \$5000 he needed.¹⁹³

The following day, Greenspun, Sosnow, and a crew of men from the salvage yard loaded approximately fifty-eight crates of military surplus onto a

¹⁹² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 90-91; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 95.

¹⁹³ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 90-92.

freighter. Sixteen of those crates bore Greenspun's black paint marks, signifying they contained the guns and barrels.¹⁹⁴ All of the cargo was consigned to Service Airways, Inc.—the New York airline used by the Jewish Agency to front the operation. Greenspun's long, arduous procurement operation in Hawaii was finally complete. He thought back to that day in Las Vegas when he first met with Schwimmer and Selk in their room at the Last Frontier Hotel—the day his journey began. He remembered they estimated it would take him a few weeks start to finish.¹⁹⁵ It took more than two months. It was March 19 when the freighter set sail for Los Angeles, where his cousin Ray was eagerly awaiting the equipment's arrival.¹⁹⁶

Nearly a week later, on 25 March 1948, the shipment arrived at Los Angeles Harbor in Wilmington.¹⁹⁷ Immediately after the shipment arrived, Selk was on the phone with Greenspun. Again, his voice carried a sense of urgency. Selk was worried about the load of machine guns and gun barrels that Greenspun obtained in Honolulu.¹⁹⁸

“This was supposed to be an aircraft deal,” Selk reiterated. “And I got a tip that the feds have been nosing around on Oahu.”¹⁹⁹

FBI records confirm Selk's tip was accurate. Federal agents were investigating the salvage yard in Hawaii asking questions of all the employees. It

¹⁹⁴ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 92; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 95; Slater, *The Pledge*, 200.

¹⁹⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 83; Slater, *The Pledge*, 198.

¹⁹⁶ M.A. Jones, FBI, to Philip Nichols, U.S. Treasury, April 11, 1952, FBI File: 1348080-0 - File 10, Section 1, 6.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 94.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

was only a matter of time before one of the workers said something to tip them off about the guns. Agents would undoubtedly check the shipping manifests and trace the shipment back to Los Angeles.²⁰⁰

Greenspun, meanwhile, had been enjoying his time back home with his family in Las Vegas. But after receiving Selk's call, he was once again rushing to catch a flight to Los Angeles. At the dock in Wilmington he found the crates piled together in a dark corner of a warehouse. He knew he had to get rid of the guns as soon as possible. Selk was simultaneously rushing to get export clearances for the engines and aircraft parts but if, in the meantime, federal agents inspected the crates and found guns, the whole operation would be blown and everything would be seized. All of their work would likely be shut down and none of the military equipment—planes, parts, or guns—would ever reach the shores of Palestine. Selk was troubled immensely by the thought that they could lose everything they had procured and repaired, and Greenspun understood his concern.²⁰¹

Ray Selk telephoned a local Haganah representative and made arrangements to get a truck and a team of volunteers out to the dock to speed up the process of removing the guns. With men assembled and a truck at his disposal, Greenspun surveyed the crates and pointed out the ones bearing black indicators for the crew to load onto the truck. As soon as all sixteen crates were aboard the truck, they drove to a well-hidden, vacant barn that had been offered to Selk as a temporary storage space.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Slater, *The Pledge*, 168.

²⁰¹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 94.

²⁰² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 95; M.A. Jones, FBI, to Philip Nichols, U.S. Treasury, April 11, 1952, FBI File: 1348080-0 - File 10, Section 1, 6.

The removal of the guns from Wilmington came not a moment too soon. On April 14, customs agents descended on the dock and seized the crates that Selk's team was preparing to ship to Panama. The cargo included all of the engines and parts from Hawaii as well as additional parts that Selk added afterward.

In all, the government seized eighty-six crates from the dock that day.²⁰³ But the agents quickly noticed when reviewing manifest records that some of the original crates from the Hawaiian shipment were missing from the haul. The agents searched the dock and pressed the employees to give up the location of the crates, but their efforts came up empty. Greenspun was relieved to have evaded detection, but he would later write that the moment carried a feeling of mixed emotions. "Nobody smiled or exulted," he recalled. "Most of us were veterans, and it went against the grain to buck that same government we had fought to preserve only a few years before."²⁰⁴

Word of the customs raid spread quickly, and for those connected in any way to the operation it became clear they too ran a risk of becoming the subject of a federal investigation. Helping the Jewish cause was one thing but nobody wanted the government digging into his or her business as a result. This included the surplus dealer who lent Greenspun his barn as a temporary hiding place for the guns. After hearing about the Wilmington raid he wanted the crates removed from his property immediately. Greenspun faced a dilemma: either find another hiding

²⁰³ Customs Agent Louis Gwinn to U.S. Attorney, Los Angeles, June 28, 1948, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, Box 3155; 711.00111/7-2348 (Enclosure); National Archives and Records Administration—College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁰⁴ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 95.

place or move the guns out of the country. He decided the time had come to smuggle them out.²⁰⁵

Getting any amount of heavy artillery out of Los Angeles with federal agents in pursuit was no easy task. But getting fifteen tons of aircraft machine guns out of the same harbor that customs officials raided must have seemed nearly impossible.²⁰⁶ With the authorities watching the docks closely and looking for the missing cargo from Hawaii, shipping the guns out of Los Angeles on a freighter was simply out of the question. Greenspun needed to find a smaller, less traceable ship and began searching for such a vessel. Ray Selk, meanwhile, went to the barn to prepare the guns for shipment. He unloaded the guns and gun barrels and destroyed the crates.²⁰⁷ No ship small enough to evade detection would be large enough to hold sixteen large shipping crates, so the weapons needed to be dismantled and packed into smaller bundles. It was a massive task and Selk needed helping hands.

Volunteers again had to be assembled on short notice, so having a well-connected facilitator was crucial. Ray Selk's personal connections in Los Angeles were limited so he needed someone who had enough contacts and pull to assemble a team of people at the drop of a hat. He turned to a Hollywood film producer named Bernie Fineman. A well-known executive who worked at several studios throughout his career, Fineman had established an extensive network of friends

²⁰⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 95-96; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 95.

²⁰⁶ Slater, *The Pledge*, 200.

²⁰⁷ M.A. Jones, FBI, to Philip Nichols, U.S. Treasury, April 11, 1952, FBI File no. 1348080-0 - File 10, Section 1, 6.

and colleagues. Answering Selk's request, he delivered a team of volunteers comprised of businessmen, lawyers, dentists, and film hands, among others²⁰⁸

Also joining the effort was a young UCLA student named Lenny Cohen. Cohen volunteered because he wanted to do everything he could to help bring a Jewish state into existence. It had long been the hope of his recently deceased father that the Jews might one day secure a national home of their own. Before the elder Cohen passed away, he told Lenny to send money to support the Zionist cause. In a show of even greater support, Cohen joined other American Jews in sending weapons. Later, he even joined the fight directly by travelling to Israel to battle the Arab coalition.²⁰⁹

The men dismantled the machine guns and covered them in cosmoline—a rust inhibiting solution that would protect them from moisture damage while at sea. Then, in the final packing stages, they grouped the guns into bundles, wrapped them in canvas tarps, and repacked them into gunnysacks. Selk burned the broken crates to destroy the evidence and then distributed the one hundred and fifty bundles of gun parts—each weighing two hundred pounds—to anyone he could find who would temporarily hold them until they could be loaded onto the boat.²¹⁰

A week later, Greenspun finally had the transport vessel he was looking for. He made arrangements with a young boat owner named Leland Lewis to take the guns aboard his vessel, *Idalia*, and sail them down to Acapulco, where they would then be transshipped to Panama and ultimately to Palestine. Years later, in an

²⁰⁸ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 96-97; Slater, *The Pledge*, 200.

²⁰⁹ Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 195.

²¹⁰ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 96; Slater, *The Pledge*, 200.

interview with Leonard Slater, who detailed the event in his book *The Pledge*, Lewis claimed that he had been “very willing” to be a part of the endeavor from the beginning. “I was imbued with the idea of sailing and adventure,” Lewis explained, “and the combination of that with doing something for Palestine appealed to me.”²¹¹

Greenspun recalled the arrangements with Lewis a little differently. Lewis had in fact stepped up when other yacht owners had turned down the request. But Greenspun felt that Lewis was less imbued with the idea of purpose and adventure than he was with the idea of making a quick buck. He would later write that Lewis was “at first reluctant to become involved; then he agreed to accept three thousand dollars ‘to cover expenses’.”²¹² Regardless of his motive, Lewis chartered the *Idalia* to Greenspun and agreed to skipper the boat. Greenspun drove the guns to the harbor and parked the truck in an old lumberyard adjacent to a large loading dock until they could be loaded on the *Idalia*. The mission was on.

Another team of volunteers loaded the guns onto the boat, but toward the end of the arduous process, a problem emerged. The weight of the guns was proving more than the *Idalia* was meant to bear, and the burden took a toll on the vessel. The boat’s wooden gangway bent and began to crack under the heavy weight, a guardrail broke, and the portholes on the hull gradually began to creep beneath the water’s surface. Lewis took one look at his boat and wanted to abort the mission. He felt that attempting to sail to Acapulco with the portholes riding

²¹¹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 201.

²¹² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 96.

as low as they were was essentially “suicide,” so he ordered Greenspun to get the guns off of his boat.²¹³

Greenspun was beside himself that Lewis would even suggest such a thing and he made it clear that unloading the cargo was not an option. The guns would stay aboard and the yacht would make the run. After arguing about the situation, they finally settled on a new arrangement. Greenspun upped Lewis’s payment to four thousand dollars and told him that he only needed the *Idalia* to sail the guns to Catalina Island where another boat would be waiting to take the shipment the rest of the way. Lewis finally agreed to it but the whole ordeal delayed their departure a full day. They would have to leave the following evening at midnight.²¹⁴

As soon as the yacht made it out to sea, Greenspun told Lewis the two of them needed to have a word. As far as he was concerned, he had already received more than enough bad news from Lewis before they finally got underway. Now that the mission was back on and the boat was at sea, it was Greenspun’s turn to deliver a blow.

“There’s no boat waiting for us at Catalina, Lee,” Greenspun said as he stared Lewis directly in the eyes. “The *Idalia* is going all the way to Acapulco and it’s taking the guns with it.”²¹⁵

²¹³ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 99-100; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence*, 95; Slater, *The Pledge*, 202.

²¹⁴ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 102-103.

²¹⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 104-105; Slater, *The Pledge*, 202.

Lewis was incensed as Greenspun continued. “Now if you’ll simply accept that fact and get us there, I’ll go through with the original deal and give you your lousy four thousand dollars.”²¹⁶

Lewis challenged back. “And if I don’t?”²¹⁷

Greenspun raised a pistol to Lewis’s temple. “I’ll blow your brains out and heave you over the side.”²¹⁸

Greenspun felt there was nothing he could say that would change Lewis’s heart about the mission, but it seemed the idea of taking a bullet to the head was enough to change his mind.²¹⁹ Years later, Lewis would argue that he changed his mind later that evening on his own accord, not because of Greenspun’s threat. He claimed that the moment Greenspun put a gun to his head and told him he had to sail the *Idalia* all the way to Acapulco, he devised a plan to sabotage the trip.²²⁰

His plan was to wait until Greenspun and the rest of the men fell asleep. Then, as the boat approached San Diego, he would steer it into the Coronado channel, aim for the rocks, and jump overboard to swim ashore. According to Lewis, his plan was unfolding just as he envisioned until he was standing at the side of the boat staring at the water below. Suddenly he found himself simply unable to go through with it. He began to feel differently. For one, he could hardly bear the idea of abandoning his boat and steering it into the rocks. But beyond that he claimed that he was suddenly struck by the gravity of the situation. “I felt those guns ought to get to Palestine,” he later said of his feelings that night.

²¹⁶ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 104-105.

²¹⁷ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 104-105.

²¹⁸ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 104-105.

²¹⁹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 105-106; Gandt, *Angels In the Sky*, 55.

²²⁰ Slater, *The Pledge*, 203.

“That was the turning point of the whole trip. Greenspun probably doesn’t realize it; probably never knew it.”²²¹

After making a stop in Ensenada to obtain fuel and other supplies, as well as engage in a little *mordida*—a Mexican custom of bribing officials to turn a blind eye—the *Idalia* finally completed its journey to Acapulco where Greenspun and Lewis gladly parted ways.²²² A local Jewish Agency representative arranged transportation for Greenspun and the machine guns to Mexico City where several of the C-46 transport planes that Schwimmer and Selk had overhauled in Burbank would arrive to carry the guns across the Atlantic.²²³ But by the time Greenspun reached Mexico City the plans had changed. In a rush to move Schwimmer’s entire operation out of the United States before April 15, when stricter export control laws went into effect, all of the equipment from Burbank was loaded onto the C-46s. None of the planes had any space left for the guns.²²⁴ Greenspun was told to phone Haganah’s New York office to receive updated instructions.²²⁵

Speaking in coded language over the phone, Haganah’s representative in New York explained that Greenspun’s current “business deal” was only the start, and that more “merchandise” was desperately needed for the “new establishment” scheduled to open in May. If they failed to increase their “sales potential” immediately, the “competition” would put them “out of business” by June.²²⁶ The

²²¹ Slater, *The Pledge*, 203.

²²² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 108-111.

²²³ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 116; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence*, 95.

²²⁴ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence*, 95; Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 116.

²²⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 117.

²²⁶ Ibid.

covert language was more than just a precautionary measure. It was absolutely necessary. Greenspun and Haganah's American leaders were well aware that the feds were on their trail and would set up eyes and ears wherever they could. Every conversation had to be treated as though someone was listening in. Phones were not the only point vulnerability either, as Greenspun discovered first hand when he found a small microphone wired into the wall of his makeshift office in Mexico City's Hotel Reforma.²²⁷

Lee Lewis, meanwhile, was making matters worse for Greenspun. After the two parted ways in Acapulco, Lewis went to the American Consul and then to the FBI to divulge details about the gun-smuggling trip. He was still bitter over Greenspun's abuses and concerned about the likelihood of being legally culpable for his role in breaking export control laws. He included details about the logistics of the operation, names of the men involved, and the nature of the cargo on board. He claimed he was forced into the endeavor from the start, citing Greenspun's use of the pistol, but mentioned nothing about the money he was paid or the apparent change of heart he had when he refrained from sabotaging the trip.²²⁸ If federal agents ever believed he was truly forced to cooperate against his will, that belief would only last so long. One FBI report revealed that despite Lewis' claims of innocence, the Bureau received further information that Lewis was "apparently receptive to the deal, was paid for the use of his boat, and that there was no evidence that force was used to gain his assistance."²²⁹ Regardless, they were

²²⁷ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 122-123.

²²⁸ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 115; Slater, *The Pledge*, 204; Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 195.

²²⁹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 117-118.

after Greenspun at that point, and Lewis had furnished them with the information they needed to stay hot on his heels.²³⁰

After the phone call, Greenspun was troubled. Reflecting on the ordeal he had just undergone smuggling fifteen tons of guns into Mexico, the idea of purchasing more “merchandise” made Greenspun uneasy, especially when he was told how much of that merchandise was desired. The Jewish Agency chartered a freighter called the *Kefalos* to transport machine guns and spare barrels, but the *Kefalos* had a six thousand ton capacity and the Jewish Agency was hoping the entire ship would be full of guns, munitions, and other supplies before it departed Tampico Bay for Haifa in Palestine. They trusted Greenspun’s knowledge and gave him “carte blanche spending power.”²³¹ He contemplated turning down the request in favor of going home, but the agency told him there was nobody else who could step in and do the job as quickly and effectively as Greenspun would. He agreed to stay on.²³²

Greenspun immediately embarked on what he called a “*mordida*-punctuated shopping spree,” and within five days of scouring through acres of Mexican arsenals he’d purchased \$1,165,000 worth of guns, bombs, cannons, and ammo—a total equaling approximately \$12,000,000 in 2017.²³³ His spree continued as he worked to fill the ship with as much good-quality war materiel as he could possibly find. *Mordida* certainly made obtaining weapons in Mexico easier than in the United States, but smuggling them out of the country presented

²³⁰ Special Agent in Charge, Salt Lake City, to FBI Director, April 17, 1953, FBI file no. 1348080-0 - File 10 Section 3,

²³¹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 120.

²³² Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 120.

²³³ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 121-122.

similar challenges, only this time on a much larger scale due to the size of the ship being used to export the cargo.

As the departure date approached, information about the *Kefalos*'s destination and cargo was reaching high-level Mexican officials, including President Miguel Alemán. Though Greenspun and his Mexican chaperones had treated every official they encountered quite generously, pressures on the government to place an embargo on the *Kefalos* and prevent it from leaving port were intensifying. Greenspun got word that the embargo could be implemented at any point, so they finished loading the cargo of guns, ammunition, and aviation gasoline, then buried it all under a hundred tons of sugar in hundred-pound sacks.²³⁴

Greenspun was intent on getting the ship out of Mexican waters before the embargo was ordered, but doing so would require innovation, bribery, and deception. Greenspun needed to clear his head so he and Sosnow decided to head to a bar, grab a beer to take a bit of the edge off, and brainstorm any last minute options. As they approached the bar, Greenspun saw his solution staring him right in the face. Directly next door was the Chinese Embassy and to his surprise the doors were actually open on a Sunday. He redirected Sosnow. The two men entered the embassy and were courteously greeted by the second deputy consul. Greenspun put on his best act as a tycoon, speaking frankly as he puffed on a cigar.²³⁵

²³⁴ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 135; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 96.

²³⁵ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 143-144.

“I’m interested in making heavy capital investments in Formosa,” he told the diplomat. “Can you supply me with detailed information about the possibilities?”²³⁶

The man was all too happy to oblige and indicated that he could provide them with plenty of helpful literature, which he had down the hall. Greenspun gestured to Sosnow and told him in Yiddish to accompany the man down the hall and occupy him for as long as he could.²³⁷

As the two men disappeared down the hallway, Greenspun made his way from door to door, testing the knobs until one opened. Inside was an office, which he quickly ransacked, grabbing stationary, envelopes, two official stamps, and a couple of inkpads. He cracked the door open hoping nobody would see him and carefully slipped back into the foyer. Just then, Sosnow and the second deputy consul made their way back down the hallway. Greenspun quickly thanked the helpful man and ushered Sosnow out of the building and across the street where he told him to ditch the literature because Greenspun had everything they needed.²³⁸

Greenspun rushed back to the shipping office where he and three others worked tirelessly into the night, typing up fraudulent but official-looking documents with falsified inventories and bearing the official seals of the Chinese Embassy. They submitted the paperwork to officials in Mexico City and waited to hear back. Days went by with no word. Then the following Saturday, Greenspun received a call that left a sinking feeling in his gut. The following Monday morning at 8:00 a.m., President Alemán planned to issue an order instructing the

²³⁶ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 144; Formosa, or the Republic of Formosa, is an earlier name of modern-day Taiwan.

²³⁷ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 144.

²³⁸ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 144-145.

customs officials in Tampico Bay to hold the *Kefalos*, board the vessel, and seize its cargo. They could wait no longer. Greenspun hopped on a plane and arrived in Tampico early the next morning. He would have to use the falsified documents on the local officials, along with offering the standard *mordida*, and pray that they would grant the ship clearance to undertake its transcontinental journey.²³⁹

Early Sunday morning, Greenspun paid an official to arrange a visit from the Chief Inspector. Then he paid off the Chief Inspector, who looked over the forged Chinese documents and then phoned customs officials to clear the ship and its crew. Greenspun rushed to the bridge to instruct the ship's captain on its new, immediate itinerary. Similar to Lewis, Captain Adolph Oko had very little patience for Greenspun barking orders on his ship, and the stressful situation intensified things. He shot back at Greenspun and ordered him off of his boat. Greenspun sighed. He had been in a similar situation with Lewis. He reached into his pocket and brandished the pistol once more. Moments later, the officials cleared the vessel, Greenspun exited the ship, and a compliant Captain Oko sailed the ship out of Tampico Bay.

Back in the United States, the U.S. government was desperately trying to enforce its arms embargo through export control laws. The extent of arms smuggling, particularly in relation to the Palestine conflict, caused the State Department to devote more resources and involve more sections of the department to stop the clandestine operations.²⁴⁰ But despite the best efforts of the State Department, the FBI, and U.S. Customs, Greenspun and the Jewish Agency stayed one step ahead.

²³⁹ Greenspun, *Where I Stand*, 147-148.

²⁴⁰ Memorandum, July 15, 1948; General Records of the State Department, RG 59, Box 3155; 711.00111 Armament Control/7-1548; NARA—College Park.

By the time the State Department first learned of the *Kefalos*, the information was not sourced from its own embassy or even one of the federal agencies conducting an investigation of the arms smuggling ring, but rather from a newspaper article written by a United Press contributor and printed in newspapers across the United States.²⁴¹ Upon reading the article, Secretary of State Marshall wired an urgent message to the American Consul in Tampico about the reportedly “large shipment including cannon and machine guns from the U.S. destined Palestine [sic].” Marshall wanted the consul to “investigate immediately” into the whereabouts of the “*Keslos*”—the name inaccurately reported in the U.P. article—and “if possible examine the manifest.”²⁴² But they were too late. The ship—as the old saying goes—had sailed, and the United States government had failed to enforce the embargo and keep American weapons out of the new state of Israel.

²⁴¹ United Press, “Arms at Tampico Investigated,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1948.

²⁴² Secretary of State George Marshall to American Consul, Tampico, July 20, 1948; General Records of the State Department, RG 59, Box 3155; 711.00111 Armament Control/7-2048; NARA—College Park.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The American citizens who procured and smuggled arms to Israel were of vital importance to its survival. The U.S. government refused to aid the Jews in their fight against the Arabs.²⁴³ President Harry S. Truman, the self-described “best friend the Jews had in America,” stood idly by while his State Department imposed an arms embargo that placed the Jews at an immediate disadvantage to the Arabs.²⁴⁴ Absent critical concessions in money and arms from officials in Washington, the Jewish Agency turned to Jewish Americans and Zionist organizations for the financial and military support it desperately needed—and support was delivered in unprecedented measure. Historian Melvin Urofsky wrote of American Jews and Israel: “No other ethnic group in American history has so extensive an involvement with a foreign nation.”²⁴⁵ This was certainly true at the point of Israel’s conception and birth, and those involved in procuring arms for the Jewish state not only secured its existence but positioned it as a strategic asset in the eyes of Washington policy makers.

The obstacle preventing the underground arms movement from assuming its rightful place in early U.S.-Israel history is that it was conducted almost entirely in secrecy. Most of those involved in the clandestine operation hid their affiliation to avoid federal prosecution, rendering it impossible to fully measure the extent of these private contributions.²⁴⁶ As John Snetsinger wrote, “The entire

²⁴³ Elizabeth Stephens, *US Policy towards Israel: The Role of Political Culture in Defining the ‘Special Relationship’* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 27.

²⁴⁴ John B. Judis, *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 3.

²⁴⁵ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), 115.

²⁴⁶ Leonard Slater, *The Pledge* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 318-322.

underground vanished as soon as Israel gave evidence that the continuation of such activities was no longer necessary.”²⁴⁷ Records were destroyed and many of the participants slipped away into anonymity.²⁴⁸

Further complicating the historical narrative is the fact that, for many years, Israeli Jews assumed a “policy of neglect” to downplay American contributions.²⁴⁹ Perhaps neglecting American involvement was part of a strategy to aid a creation-narrative that emphasized the contributions and sacrifices of Israelis rather than foreigners, or possibly it was employed to project an image of independent strength, both to promote national pride and deter would-be Arab aggressors.²⁵⁰ More likely it was intended to serve both purposes. Whatever the reason, it would take nearly four and a half decades after the end of the First Arab-Israeli War for the Israeli government to dedicate a memorial honoring the overseas volunteers who contributed to the nation’s survival.²⁵¹

Gradually, more information about the American underground arms operations became available. The first details surfaced during the court cases of those who were indicted and prosecuted—including Schwimmer and Greenspun—but those details were limited. Over time, some of the underground volunteers felt at liberty to share their personal stories about the hidden network and its modus operandi.²⁵² Undoubtedly, most of the details are forever lost. However, even

²⁴⁷ John Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), 9.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ A. Joseph Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974), xx.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., xx-xxi.

²⁵¹ Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 201.

²⁵² Slater, *The Pledge*, 321.

through the arguably sparing details available, the scope and scale of the operation is evident.

Ships were purchased for transporting Jews from Europe to Palestine—both before and after Israel’s independence—which provided the Jews with more men and women for fighting in the war or working in key production jobs while others manned the frontlines.²⁵³ Thirty tons of explosives were discovered on a single shipment destined for Palestine. Guns and ammunition destined for Palestine were found hidden inside bundles of clothing at a downtown New York import-export firm; thousands of souvenir rifles and pistols were collected by the proprietor of a New Jersey amusement park; and a Denver operation collected arms and gunpowder purchased from sporting goods stores as far away as a thousand miles, then packed them discretely in oil drums with false bottoms.²⁵⁴ Procurement efforts also sent machining equipment, parachutes, jeeps, ambulances, and communications equipment for use in the war.²⁵⁵

It is rare when historians can trace military assets from the point of procurement to the point of application on the battlefield, but historians generally agree on the crucial importance of American arms to the Israeli war effort.²⁵⁶ Al Schwimmer and Hank Greenspun were among those individuals whose direct

²⁵³ Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 7.

²⁵⁴ Joseph B. Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement: The Crucial Decade, 1939-1949* (New York: Herzl Press, 1966), 326; A. Joseph Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 74-77.

²⁵⁵ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence*, 78-79.

²⁵⁶ Slater, *The Pledge*, 306; Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 9; Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 279; Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 34; Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence*, 271; Robert Gandt, *Angels in the Sky: How A Band of Volunteer Airmen Saved the New State of Israel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 377; Jeffrey Weiss and Craig Weiss, *I Am My Brother’s Keeper: American Volunteers in Israel’s War for Independence* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1998), 140.

impact can be seen through records and testimonials. Their efforts served as evidence of a movement that influenced the outcome of the First Arab-Israeli War, and forever changed the trajectory of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The Arabs promised a bloody war back in September 1947, and a U.S. intelligence report, dated November 6, echoed that prediction. The Central Intelligence Group was monitoring Arab broadcasts in the Middle East beginning early September and learned that troops from Iraq, Transjordan, Syria, and Egypt were already mobilizing to invade Palestine. Syrian and Egyptian forces were already stationed along the northern and southern borders of the proposed Jewish state.²⁵⁷

On November 28, 1947—just one day before the U.N. partition vote—the Central Intelligence Agency published a lengthy report detailing the potential consequences of partition and assessed, among other things, that armed hostilities would ensue, the Arabs would have the long-term advantage in munitions and reinforcements, and the Jews would gradually be depleted of men and munitions leading up to their defeat.²⁵⁸ Yet, despite the American government's expressed support for partition, and in spite of intelligence assessments that predicted a violent Arab reaction, the State Department implemented an arms embargo against Palestine and the Middle East in early December. Policy officials hoped that keeping American arms out of the region might reduce or contain the level of violence in Palestine, and as a result reduce or eliminate pressure to commit

²⁵⁷ Central Intelligence Group Information, Report No. 00-F-31, November 6, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-04864A000100040003-2.pdf>

²⁵⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine," November 28, 1947, 1-2, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003000180001-8.pdf>.

American forces to settle the unrest. Truman agreed and committed to enforcing the embargo for the duration of the conflict.²⁵⁹

The Jewish Agency immediately appealed to the State Department for aid. On December 8, agency representatives asked the U.S. government to provide military supplies, including planes and machine guns. In a conversation with State Department officials, the men explained that the U.S. government was the first entity from which they sought this type of assistance, but if the government refused to supply sufficient equipment, the agency “would perforce be obliged to turn elsewhere.”²⁶⁰ The State Department reiterated its arms embargo policy and turned the representatives away without aid.

A month later, two Jewish Agency representatives again met with a group of State Department officials and expressed their hope that the United States would lead the United Nations in an effort to arm the Jewish militia, which was ill-equipped to defend itself against Arab hostilities. They proposed that a policy of “strong support by the U.S. for partition in the Security Council and the provision of equipment for the Jewish militia would indicate American determination and would thus have a stabilizing effect on the situation in Palestine.”²⁶¹ Supporters in Congress also pushed for immediate removal or modification of the embargo to allow arms to reach the Jewish militia.²⁶² Yet, once again the State Department

²⁵⁹ Dan Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement with the Palestine Problem* (Los Angeles: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 243; Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 174-175.

²⁶⁰ Loy Henderson, Memorandum of Conversation, December 8, 1947, 501.BB Palestine/12-947, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 1303.

²⁶¹ Memorandum of Conversation by Mr. Fraser Wilkins, NEA Division, January 6, 1948, 501.BB Palestine/1-648, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 538.

²⁶² Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, 318-319.

refused to act. The head of the department's Policy Planning Staff, George Kennan, argued against any American response whatsoever to Arab "armed interference" in Palestine because it would "cut with right angles across our entire policy with regard to the Middle East."²⁶³ The policy Kennan spoke of was to appease the Arabs in order to protect U.S. interests and keep them from "opening the door to Soviet political or military penetration," and also to refrain from making any further commitment to the creation of a Jewish state, whose survival appeared "improbable."²⁶⁴ Even as the British withdrawal drew nigh, the anti-Zionist attitude of the State Department showed no sign of abating.

Meanwhile, as Arab nations hostile to a Jewish state prepared to invade Palestine in the days leading up to May 15, the British continued to supply them with arms. The State Department received numerous letters regarding the embargo from individuals and organizations, including U.S. Senators, U.S. Representatives, Eleanor Roosevelt, the Congress of American Women, a reverend, an archbishop, and a rabbi. In fact, the department received so many letters asking for a repeal of the embargo that diplomats resorted to using a form letter to speed up the process of answering the inquiries.²⁶⁵

To alleviate domestic pressures and protect its embargo, the State Department asked Great Britain to temporarily suspend its shipments of arms to Arab states.²⁶⁶ The British government refused to join the United States in an

²⁶³ George Kennan, Personal Comments on Memorandum by Dean Rusk, January 29, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948*, Vol. 5, 576-577.

²⁶⁴ Report by the Policy Planning Staff on Position of the United States with Respect to Palestine, January 19, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948*, Vol. 5, 546-554.

²⁶⁵ General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, Box 15; Office of Near Eastern Affairs; National Archives and Records Administration—College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁶⁶ Robert O. Freedman, Introduction to *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israel Relations*, ed. Robert O. Freedman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 2.

arms embargo against the entire Middle East, citing contract obligations as justification for continuing its shipments of arms to the Arabs, even amid the violent conflict. Rather than forcing the hand of the British government, State Department officials decided to merely “let the matter ride as it is and hope that the U.S. can nevertheless succeed in maintaining the arms embargo.”²⁶⁷ Rather than supplying the Jews with arms to level out the playing field, the U.S. government kowtowed to the British and Arabs.

By March 1948, even the idea of a Jewish state was under reconsideration in Washington. Both the State Department and President Truman were retreating from partition. On March 19, the State Department’s representative at the United Nations proposed the abandonment of partition in favor of a trusteeship. Truman agreed that, at the time, partition seemed impossible to implement peacefully, so he signed off on the trusteeship proposal. The president was unhappy with the State Department’s delivery of the proposal because they made it sound like a permanent replacement to partition, whereas he viewed trusteeship as a temporary solution until the Arabs and Jews reached an agreement on the terms of partition. Nevertheless, temporary or permanent, the Truman administration was flirting with a complete policy reversal on the issue of partition in the weeks leading up to Israel’s independence.²⁶⁸

Truman’s symbolic endorsement, therefore, was not an act of staunch support for Israel, but rather an act of concession, in which the president acknowledged that—at least for the time being—the Jewish state’s existence was a reality. The circumstances dictated that there was little if anything to be gained

²⁶⁷ Memorandum of Conversation by Deputy Director of NEA, Satterthwaite, January 29, 1948, 867N.01/1-2648, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948*, Vol. 5, 581-582.

²⁶⁸ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 190-197.

from withholding recognition, so he extended it immediately, simultaneously forestalling Soviet intervention in the region and banking some much-needed political capital with Jewish voters in an election year.²⁶⁹ However, *de facto* recognition in no way obliged Truman to support the Jewish state during its fight for survival—and support it he did not. He not only refused to repeal the arms embargo, but also strengthened it with a March 1948 proclamation that greatly increased the types of goods that required State Department approval for export.

Arms aside, there were other ways Truman could have supported the Jewish state in its infancy. Time and again, the Jewish Agency and other pro-Israel advocates petitioned the Truman administration to provide a loan and grant full *de jure* recognition to Israel. However, after extending *de facto* recognition immediately following Israel's declaration of independence, Truman turned his attentions elsewhere and left the policy decisions to his State Department. He was all too aware that in making his last-minute decision to recognize the Jewish state, he directly opposed the expressed will of Secretary of State Marshall, and he dared not overrule Marshall again at the risk of losing his respected foreign policy advisor during an election year. He promised that from that point forward he would not to intervene in Middle East policy without Marshall's consent.²⁷⁰

Truman held back assistance to the Jewish state because he had no personal commitment to it. He was sympathetic to the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and believed that Jews should be allowed to settle in Palestine if they chose, but he never felt a deep conviction about a Jewish state. In fact, he disdained religious sectarianism and therefore always felt uneasy about a state built with a religious

²⁶⁹ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 208-211.

²⁷⁰ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 232.

framework.²⁷¹ Truman thought a federated state governed by both Arabs and Jews was the best solution.²⁷² When that proposal failed to gain traction—and Truman blamed political Zionists for its failure—he reluctantly supported partition. When partition appeared unworkable, Truman considered abandoning it and pursuing the State Department’s trusteeship proposal. When that failed, the president extended recognition to Israel. Yet, even then Truman remained uncommitted. In a letter written to a colleague the day after extending recognition, Truman reiterated his belief that a federated state was still the best solution, and he remained optimistic that “eventually we are going to get it worked out just that way.”²⁷³ The president’s de facto recognition of Israel, therefore, was halfhearted at best.

Truman’s disconnect from Israel was evident almost immediately following recognition. When Israel’s president appealed to Truman for a loan on May 25, Truman told him “if the loan was necessary, after the state was fully in existence, he would have to go through the usual channels that such things go through.”²⁷⁴ Then when a reporter asked for more information at a press conference two days later, Truman scoffed that of course Israel “would like to have a loan, just like every other country. If you know of any other country that wouldn’t like to have a loan, I wish you would name them.”²⁷⁵ Truman’s dismissive attitude toward Israel’s request for financial assistance at the very moment the infant nation was

²⁷¹ Judis, *Genesis*, 4, 193.

²⁷² Judis, *Genesis*, 3-4.

²⁷³ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 222.

²⁷⁴ The President’s News Conference, May 27, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1633>.

²⁷⁵ The President’s News Conference, May 27, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1633>.

under siege is demonstrative of the general approach he took toward the Jewish state after May 14.

Truman refused to lift the embargo and refused to push for a loan, but he also refrained from granting *de jure* recognition when requested. The Israeli government and American Zionist groups appealed to the White House and the State Department for full diplomatic recognition multiple times throughout 1948. The president responded that such would only be granted after Israel established a permanent government through national elections. For the duration of 1948, Truman denied the pleas of the Israeli government and resisted urgings from political allies and pro-Israel advisors to grant full recognition, authorize a loan, or repeal the arms embargo. For all the cases made by historians that the White House embraced a pro-Zionist platform primarily for political gain, Truman steered clear of the Israel issue for most of the election year, just as he had promised Secretary of State Marshall that he would.²⁷⁶ Only victory over the Arabs would change Washington's view of Israel, and that victory would have to be achieved without formal U.S. aid.

Al Schwimmer and Hank Greenspun represented a network of Americans who undertook the daunting task of saving the Jewish nation that Truman in effect abandoned during its time of need. While the Jewish Agency and other Zionist organizations continued lobbying Washington to remove the embargo, the arms procurement operation raced ahead, accumulating planes, weapons, ammunition, and other implements of war. The combined and often coordinated efforts of Schwimmer and Greenspun resulted in the acquisition of thirteen planes before May 1948—ten of which made it to Israel—as well as several spare engines and

²⁷⁶ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 240-241.

parts, machine guns, ammunition, cannons, aerial bombs, and two thousand tons of airplane fuel.²⁷⁷ All supplies aided Israel's war effort, but none proved more valuable than the planes and fuel.

Schwimmer's planes arrived just in time to help the Israelis stop a multi-front siege by a coalition of troops invading from the neighboring Arab states. The Arabs formed the coalition in an act of solidarity because they viewed partition as unjust, unfair, inhumane, and a violation of promises made by President Roosevelt that the United States would consult the Arabs before making any major changes to Palestine.²⁷⁸ On May 15, immediately following the end of the British mandate, Syrian troops invaded from the northeast, while the Lebanese moved in from the northwest, and the Iraqis cut across the center. Soldiers from Transjordan—under the command of British officers—focused their efforts on securing the territory around Jerusalem, while the Egyptian Army invaded along the southwest coastline and cut across Israel's vast southern desert, known as the Negev.²⁷⁹ The Jewish Agency brokered a deal with Czechoslovakia to purchase large amounts of heavy machine guns, small arms, ammunition, and mortars. The Czechs also gave the Jews access to an airfield in Zatec, where Schwimmer's transport planes were repaired, fueled, and loaded with munitions for flights to Israel.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 198.

²⁷⁸ The Minister in Saudi Arabia (Childs) to Marshall, July 23, 1947, 501.BB Palestine/7-2347, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947*, Vol. 5, 1131-1132.

²⁷⁹ Robert Gandt, *Angels in the Sky: How A Group of Volunteer Airmen Saved the New State of Israel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 77-78; Clifton Daniel, "British Say Arabs Did Not Shut Door," *New York Times*, May 27, 1948, 4, <https://search-proquest-com.hmlproxy.lib.csufresno.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/108187558/C8A9E2CA4EDC4ABCPQ/12?acountid=10349>.

²⁸⁰ Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 111-112.

The Jewish Agency knew airplanes were of overwhelming importance to Israel's survival.²⁸¹ Egypt had a moderate air force at their disposal—complete with forty fighter planes, four bombers, and four transports—which immediately began bombing and machine-gunning Jewish cities and settlements after Israel declared independence.²⁸² The Jewish Agency arranged to purchase ten Czech-made Messerschmitt ME-109 fighters—then later arranged for added an additional fifteen.²⁸³ Schwimmer's C-46 transport planes could only fit half of a ME-109 into its cargo bay, so the fighter planes were disassembled in Czechoslovakia and the wings were loaded separately from the fuselage.²⁸⁴

Under the cover of night, Schwimmer's fleet conducted regular airlifts to Israel delivering the ME-109s and crates packed full of munitions.²⁸⁵ The Messerschmitts were reassembled upon arrival and immediately put to work. By the end of May, the Jews had a small air force, and even though the Czech ME-109s were shoddily made, they immediately proved their worth in bombing raids and aerial combat against the Arabs. The Israeli pilots named themselves the “Angels of Death” and numbered their squadron the “101,” to give a semblance of a large air force. Two former UCLA students who volunteered to fly for Israel created the squadron's insignia—a winged skull wearing a flying helmet.²⁸⁶ It remains the official insignia of Israel's 101 Squadron to this day.

²⁸¹ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 81.

²⁸² Gandt, *Angels in the Sky*, 77; Associated Press, “Arabs Invade Israel and Shell Defenders,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1948, 1.

²⁸³ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 85-86.

²⁸⁴ Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 110-111; Gandt, *Angels in the Sky*, 79.

²⁸⁵ Weiss and Weiss, *I Am My Brother's Keeper*, 113.

²⁸⁶ Gandt, *Angels in the Sky*, 159-160.

Transport planes were critical to the armament of Israeli forces. Prior to the arrival of Schwimmer's planes, shipments of arms were, for the most part, small and scattered. Any attempts at moving larger shipments had to traverse thousands of miles by land and sea. It was risky transporting weapons that way, especially prior to May 15, when there existed the possibility that British forces would intercept the shipments. An even bigger concern than the high probability of risk was the slow rate of speed. Without planes, it took far too long for the shipments to reach Israel, and the Jews were critically short of weapons during the first few months of the war.²⁸⁷ Schwimmer's planes were a game changer. Operating between the latter part of May and mid-August, 1948—when the Czech operation was shut down by pressures from the U.S. State Department—the planes delivered a fleet of fighter planes and several hundred tons of weapons, ammunition, and explosives.²⁸⁸

By the time the airlift operation ended in August, the planes were delivering nearly fifty tons of equipment a week.²⁸⁹ The CIA reported that the Jews had “gained considerably from a military point of view” during the first truce period, which lasted from mid-June to early July.²⁹⁰ Israel added heavy artillery equipment and thirteen additional ME-109s, bringing their small fleet of fighter planes to an estimated “60 ME-109s, of which 24 are operational.”²⁹¹ The arms that Schwimmer's planes ferried in from Czechoslovakia resulted in a number of

²⁸⁷ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 72, 84.

²⁸⁸ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 86.

²⁸⁹ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 86.

²⁹⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, “Possible Developments from the Palestine Truce,” July 27, 1948, 5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003200140001-0.pdf>.

²⁹¹ Central Intelligence Agency, “Possible Developments from the Palestine Truce,” July 27, 1948, 5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003200140001-0.pdf>.

substantial victories on the battlefield, and the CIA determined that Jewish gains “considerably change the previously held estimate of the probable course of the war in Palestine.”²⁹² All appearances suggested that the Jews were well-enough equipped to “launch a full-scale offensive and drive the Arab forces out of Palestine.”²⁹³ That full-scale offensive came in October.

In spite of Jewish forces scoring important victories in the early summer months, the Egyptian Army maintained control of the Negev desert in the southern part of Israel. The Negev was a critical borderland between Israel and Egypt. The Jews needed to reclaim the territory, not only because the United Nations allocated that region to Israel as part of the partition plan, but also because the land provided a crucial buffer between Israel and Egypt. Without it, Israel’s landmass would be reduced significantly and the state would be extremely vulnerable to future attacks.

The Egyptian hold on the Negev included control of the north-south road, Israel’s supply route to its isolated troops in the south. In order to mount an effective attack, the Jews needed to replace their exhausted troops with fresh personnel and equip them with jeeps, heavy artillery, and mortars. Arab control of the main road made it virtually impossible to transport the resources by ground without the Egyptians intercepting the trucks before they reached their destination. In late August, Israeli military leaders decided the only way to get the supplies they needed into the Negev was through an air transport operation. Again, Schwimmer’s planes would play a critical role.²⁹⁴ In a tireless two-month

²⁹² Central Intelligence Agency, “Possible Developments from the Palestine Truce,” July 27, 1948, 5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003200140001-0.pdf>.

²⁹³ Central Intelligence Agency, “Possible Developments from the Palestine Truce,” July 27, 1948, 5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003200140001-0.pdf>.

²⁹⁴ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel’s War of Independence*, 138-141.

operation that ran between August and October, six of Schwimmer's C-46 airplanes, along with several other transport aircrafts either bought or rented by the Israeli government, flew 417 round trips to the Negev. Operation Dust—given its name because of the dirt runways used by the heavy transport planes—resulted in the transport of nearly five thousand tons of material and a fresh brigade of nearly two thousand men.²⁹⁵

Since most of the planes flew an average of three loads of cargo and personnel into the Negev each night, the biggest concern for the Israeli air force commander was scarcity of fuel. Word that Greenspun's shipment would be arriving soon from Mexico encouraged Israel's military leaders to keep the operation on schedule.²⁹⁶ Several months earlier, Greenspun's main priority was procuring artillery, and with the Czech operation shut down in August, the weapons and ammunition he stockpiled in Hawaii and Mexico were still of great importance. However, when the freighter reached Israel in September, it was the two thousand ton load of aviation fuel that made the most immediate and significant contribution to the Jewish war effort by enabling the Israelis to complete Operation Dust and launch the offensive in mid-October that broke the Egyptian Army's grip on the Negev.²⁹⁷

Largely because of Schwimmer's planes, the Jewish forces routed the Egyptian Army in the Negev. It was the first time a truly concerted air and ground operation was implemented, beginning with air strikes on Egyptian forces in multiple locations and then attacking them on the ground from the rear. The

²⁹⁵ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 139, 141; Gandt, *Angels in the Sky*, 231.

²⁹⁶ Gandt, *Angels in the Sky*, 229-231.

²⁹⁷ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 96-97.

offensive gave Israel control over most of the Negev—including the north-south road—cut off the Egyptian lines of communication and supply, and caused a frantic retreat by the Egyptian Army that left behind some five thousand soldiers. The Egyptians tried to consolidate their strength but suffered losses in territory and morale that they would never regain. By October 22, Israel was in commanding control of the war.²⁹⁸

There was a noticeable change in Washington's tone in October as well. In an October 24 statement, President Truman reiterated his promise to deliver prompt de jure recognition after Israel held its first elections and also claimed to have directed the necessary departments and agencies to expedite a loan.²⁹⁹ Truman further expressed his support of Israel on October 28, when he declared that America needed to help Israel by ensuring that it becomes "large enough, free enough, and strong enough to make its people self-supporting and secure." He added that the Israeli people "proved themselves worthy of the best traditions of hardy pioneers," and had established a "modern and efficient state, with the highest standards of Western civilization."³⁰⁰ The timing of Truman's renewed interest in Israel is universally appraised as a political response on the eve of the election following a similar statement made by his Republican rival, Thomas Dewey, on October 22.³⁰¹ However, it should not be overlooked that President Truman's statements, that both suggested a national interest in Israel's prosperity

²⁹⁸ Heckelman, *American Volunteers and Israel's War of Independence*, 141-144.

²⁹⁹ Statement by the President on Israel, October 24, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=2004>.

³⁰⁰ President Truman's Address in Madison Square Garden, October 28, 1948. Online by Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, <https://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=2013>

³⁰¹ Judis, *Genesis*, 334; Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, 301; Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 252; Schoenbaum, *The United States and the State of Israel*, 62; Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, 129-130.

and an affirmation of what the Jewish state had already achieved, coincided with the significant gains made by the Jewish forces following Operation Dust.

Although the president advocated for support of Israel in late 1948, he continued to defer to the State Department, even after he secured a second term. The State Department continued to hold back support until an armistice between Israel and Egypt was signed in January 1949, at which point its view of Israel changed. Whereas in August, the State Department had no interest in approving a loan to Israel because its embattled state “would render promises to pay almost meaningless,” by the fall of 1948, the department assessed Israel’s position quite differently.³⁰² In an October 13 statement made by a State Department official to the Export-Import Bank, the department acknowledged that it initially refused Israel’s loan because “its future seemed uncertain,” however, “since that time a number of changes have taken place in the political, military, and economic situation of Israel.”³⁰³ The statement concluded, “In view of these changes in the situation of Israel the Department of State believes that the Export-Import Bank should give renewed consideration to loan applications from the Provisional Government of Israel.”³⁰⁴ In the State Department’s reconsideration of Israel’s loan request, Israel’s stability acted as its collateral. Suddenly, Israel was seen as a potential democratic ally in the Middle East and its security became intrinsically

³⁰² Acting Secretary of State Robert Lovett to President Harry S. Truman, August 11, 1948, 867N.5151/8-1148, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 623-625

³⁰³ Statement to be made by the Alternate Department of State Member to th Board of Export-Import Bank with Regard to the Israeli Loan, October 12, 1948, 867N.51/10-1248, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 1468.

³⁰⁴ Statement to be made by the Alternate Department of State Member to th Board of Export-Import Bank with Regard to the Israeli Loan, October 12, 1948, 867N.51/10-1248, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948, Vol. 5* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 1469.

linked to America's security. The commensurate payoff of the loan, therefore, was political.³⁰⁵

The change in the State Department's view on financial assistance represents an overall reassessment of Israel's position in the Middle East and its value as a strategic asset. Only the strengthening of Israel's military and its successive victories over the Arab armies can effectively explain, what Michael Cohen labeled, "a revolution in the department's attitude toward Israel."³⁰⁶ Less than a week after Egypt agreed to a cease-fire and entered into armistice negotiations with Israel, Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett commented, "the best way of securing Anglo-American strategic requirements in the Middle East was to win the Israelis into the Anglo-American camp and not to alienate them permanently."³⁰⁷ Israel's cease-fire agreements with its Arab neighbors in January 1949 led to the approval of a one hundred million dollar loan on January 19 and de jure recognition on January 31. In August 1949—following Israel's final armistice agreement signed by Syria in late July—the arms American arms embargo was lifted.

Ultimately, Al Schwimmer, Ray Selk, and Hank Greenspun were each indicted and sentenced to pay a \$10,000 fine. At Greenspun's sentencing, Judge Pierson Hall remarked, "This government cannot permit individuals or private groups to conduct their private wars."³⁰⁸ In fact, the government did all it could to prevent their "private wars" from succeeding, but the underground arms

³⁰⁵ Schoenbaum, *The United States and the State of Israel*, 300-301.

³⁰⁶ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 270.

³⁰⁷ Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 271.

³⁰⁸ "Arms-Shipping Plea Results in \$10,000 Fine," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1950, 7.

procurement operation persevered regardless. In doing so, private American individuals helped build a nation and influenced the course of American foreign policy for generations.

Addressing the Legacy

Israel's position as a strategic asset in the Middle East and the "special relationship" that exists between Israel and the United States were each born of the Truman years, but they were conceived through the work of American citizens who influenced policy by circumventing the government. Through contributions to Israel's victory in the First Arab-Israeli War, American citizens spawned a legacy of benevolence. As of 2018, Israel receives more U.S. aid than any other country. The small nation—roughly one-fifth the size of California's Central Valley—receives more than \$3 billion each year from the U.S. government. The next largest recipient is Egypt, which receives approximately \$1.3 billion in aid per year.³⁰⁹ Moreover, the unprecedented amount of aid Israel has received since its formation has enjoyed bipartisan support across decades of bitter party politics.

When John F. Kennedy—a Democrat—succeeded Dwight Eisenhower as president, he declared, "The United States has a special relationship with Israel in the Middle East, really comparable only to that which it has with Britain over a wide range of world affairs."³¹⁰ In 1973, President Richard Nixon—a Republican—sent more than one hundred thousand tons of munitions and materiel

³⁰⁹ "Map of Foreign Assistance Worldwide," ForeignAssistance.gov, accessed December 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/learn/about-fa>

³¹⁰ Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The United States and Israel since 1948: A Special Relationship?" *Diplomatic History*, 22, no. 2 (April 1998): 231.

to Israel to fend off an attack from Egypt and Syria.³¹¹ President Jimmy Carter declared, “Our number one commitment in the Middle East is to protect the right of Israel to exist, to exist permanently, and to exist in peace.”³¹² Under the George W. Bush administration in the early 2000s, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that, “The United States has an enduring and ironclad commitment to Israel’s security.”³¹³ The Israeli analyst Abraham Ben-Zvi defines a “special relationship” between two nations as one that can “withstand conflicts of interest and disagreements, encapsulate all aspects of interaction...and be widely accepted as justified and valid.”³¹⁴ By that definition, the enduring, bipartisan, and popular support Israel has received in the United States for decades certainly constitutes a “special relationship.”

The troubling aspect of the special relationship is that it has given way to a “false assumption that long-term purposefulness underlay American involvement” in Palestine and Israel.³¹⁵ Historian Dan Tschirgi wrote that a “spate of early selective accounts of U.S. policy prior to 1948, and the pro-Israel bias that has colored the American press” led to a distortion of history that assumes a longstanding American commitment to the Jewish state and ignores a trend of short-term policy formulations in Washington.³¹⁶

³¹¹ Jim Byron, “How Richard Nixon Saved Israel,” October 8, 2010. Online by Richard Nixon Foundation, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2010/10/how-richard-nixon-saved-israel/>.

³¹² Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “The United States and Israel since 1948: A Special Relationship?” *Diplomatic History*, 22, no. 2 (April 1998): 231.

³¹³ George E. Gruen, “The United States, Israel, and the Middle East,” *The American Jewish Yearbook*, 102 (2002): 220.

³¹⁴ Elizabeth Stephens, *US Policy Toward Israel: The Role of Political Culture in Defining the ‘Special Relationship’* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 4.

³¹⁵ Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 256.

³¹⁶ Tschirgi, *The Politics of Indecision*, 256.

The short-term formulations and uncertainty that plagued policy-making during the Truman years continue to this day. President Barack Obama spoke out against the sixty-year suffering of the Palestinian Arabs, including the “pain of dislocation” and “daily humiliations—large and small—that come with occupation.”³¹⁷ Yet, at the end of his term, Obama agreed to the largest bilateral military aid package in history, securing Israel’s existence in a “dangerous neighborhood” by committing \$38 billion in military assistance over a ten-year period commencing in 2019.³¹⁸ In 2017, President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and would move its embassy there to formalize the recognition—a move that provoked the Palestinian Arabs who have long viewed Jerusalem as their national capital.³¹⁹ Yet, in February 2018, the White House declared that it was “committed to the Palestinian people,” and to the ongoing peace process between Israel and Palestine.³²⁰ The mixed messages from Washington continue to pollute prospects for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Inconsistency has been the hallmark of U.S. involvement in the Palestine problem, and the disparity between the words and actions of Washington policy makers has persisted the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the distorted history of early U.S.-Palestine policy has led the American people to accept a lasting boondoggle in Washington’s policy decisions for decades. The Truman

³¹⁷ Judis, *Genesis*, 365.

³¹⁸ Julie Hirschfield Davis, “Obama Prods Netanyahu After Signing of U.S.-Israel Aid Deal,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2016.

³¹⁹ Saree Makdisi, “Trump’s Mideast Disaster,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2017, A13.

³²⁰ Raphael Ahren, “US Slams Abbas Over ‘Outrageous’ Insult of its Israel Envoy,” *The Times of Israel*, March 20, 2018, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-slams-abbas-over-outrageous-insult-of-its-israel-envoy/>.

recognition narrative is part of that distortion and has contributed to an assumption that both the problems and solutions in the Arab-Israeli conflict reside solely in the hands of government officials. A closer examination of the role that American citizens played in the development of Palestine policy reveals that the body politic was as important to the origin and direction of U.S. policy as any politician—including the president. By understanding that American citizens affected the course of the Palestine problem, American citizens might also be empowered to affect the Palestine solution.

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