In “Arms Wrestle,” Daniel Strieff examines the domestic politics of the Carter Administration’s heavily disputed 1978 package of military aircraft sales to Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The controversy arose from Carter’s decision to present the sales to the three countries as a single package, which could only be blocked by votes of disapproval from both houses of Congress within thirty days of the President’s declaration of intent. Although the decision to include older aircraft for Egypt aroused less opposition, many strong supporters of Israel vigorously objected to the provision of advanced F-15 jets to Saudi Arabia. Carter rejected suggestions that aircraft sales to each country be considered separately – which would have allowed Congress the opportunity to approve jets for Israel while blocking aircraft for Saudi Arabia and Egypt – arguing that each element of the package was necessary in order to ensure overall balance.

In the end, a bipartisan majority of Senators supported Carter by a vote of 54-44, thus handing the President a welcome, though costly, political victory. The case thus stands out as an exception to the normal reluctance or inability of American presidents to challenge or prevail against the pro-Israeli lobby.

The Middle East arms package complemented the Carter Administration’s diplomatic strategy toward the region. Coming after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem in November 1977 but before the Camp David summit of September 1978, the arms sales played a role in the Israeli-Egyptian peace negotiations. The inclusion of Egypt served as a reward to Sadat and allowed the Egyptian leader something tangible that he could use to counter domestic criticism of his outreach to Israel. The jet sales to Saudi Arabia served as part of the Carter Administration’s efforts to ensure the latter’s continued moderation in managing oil prices.

Yet Strieff argues that the substantive merits of the arms package were overshadowed by the domestic political stakes that Carter associated with its passage: “Carter was so eager to demonstrate he had the strength to overcome domestic opposition to pursue his international agenda that the means used to gain support for the package virtually eclipsed the end itself” (476).
Based upon “sources from Carter’s domestic and foreign staff, congressional materials, media and public opinion reports, and Israeli archives” (478), Streiff’s case study underlines Carter’s chronic worry that political friends and rivals at home did not consider him ‘tough’ enough (476). Repeatedly warned by advisors that his leadership and strength were under question, Carter welcomed the opportunity to prove his ability to prevail in a difficult struggle against opposition to the arms package from Israel and its American supporters, chiefly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Yet despite victory in the Senate, Streiff concludes that “Carter’s F-15 battle further eroded support from his party and among a traditional Democratic constituency” (498).

The 1978 arms package was not the only occasion in which Carter’s policy decisions were influenced by his desire to overcome a domestic image of weakness. In the fall of 1979, as the SALT II treaty face bleak prospects in the Senate, Carter sought to shore up his reputation for toughness by exaggerating the significance of reports about a Soviet military brigade in Cuba. After issuing blunt public demands aimed at Soviet leaders, Carter ultimately conceded that the brigade had been present for more than a decade and that the U.S. had no means to force a withdrawal. Needless to say, the episode backfired, harming rather than helping the chances for SALT II ratification.1

In December of that same year, Carter interpreted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the most threatening possible terms and carried out a series of retaliatory steps that even hawkish National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski thought went too far. Diplomatic historian and former United States Ambassador Raymond Garthoff has argued that “Part of the reason for the Carter administration’s adamant stand was the president’s own concern over the widespread domestic criticism that he had been irresolute on a variety of other issues....”2 Yet Carter’s efforts to project strength, whether in dealing with the Soviet Union abroad or recalcitrant Senators at home, won him no credit. Even following Carter’s assertive response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, strong majorities of survey respondents felt that Carter was “not tough enough” in dealing with the Soviet Union.3 The Iran hostage crisis that haunted Carter’s last year in office cemented perceptions that the President was, at best, ineffectual in foreign policy.

Streiff’s research sheds additional light on the president’s Sisyphean struggle to establish leadership over his administration’s foreign policy. Whether facing down a reluctant Senate in the Middle East arms sales case (or, even earlier, the Panama Canal Treaties) or adopting a tough stance toward the Soviet Union, Carter’s substantive foreign policy choices were often driven by his efforts to overcome domestic constraints imposed by a nagging image of weakness and indecisiveness. Yet despite these persistent efforts and individual victories, such as the Middle East arms sales case, Carter’s inability to overcome such perceptions ultimately overshadowed his significant diplomatic accomplishments, including the Panama Canal Treaties, the

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normalization of relations with China, and the Camp David Peace Accords. This President could not win for losing.

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