

Weapons for Anyone: Donald Trump and the Art of the Arms Deal

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*It's one of those stories of the century that somehow never gets treated that way. For an astounding 25 of the past 26 years, the United States has been the [leading arms dealer](#) on the planet, at some moments in near [monopolistic](#) fashion. Its major weapons-producers, including Boeing, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin, regularly pour the latest in high-tech arms and munitions into the [most explosive areas](#) of the planet with ample [assistance](#) from the Pentagon. In recent years, the [bulk](#) of those arms have gone to the Greater Middle East. **Donald Trump** is only the latest American president to preside over a global arms sales bonanza. With remarkable enthusiasm, he's appointed himself America's number one weapons salesman and he couldn't be prouder of the job he's doing.*

Earlier this month, for instance, on the very day Congress was debating whether to end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's [brutal war](#) in Yemen, Trump engaged in one of his favorite presidential activities: [bragging](#) about the economic benefits of the American arms sales he's been promoting. He was joined in his moment of braggadocio by Saudi **Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman**, the chief architect of that war. That grim conflict has killed [thousands](#) of civilians through indiscriminate air strikes, while putting [millions](#) at risk of death from famine, [cholera](#), and other "natural" disasters caused at least in part by a Saudi-led [blockade](#) of that country's ports.

That Washington-enabled humanitarian crisis provided the backdrop for the Senate's consideration of a bill co-sponsored by Vermont independent **Senator Bernie Sanders**, Utah Republican **Senator Mike Lee**, and Connecticut Democratic **Senator Chris Murphy**. It was aimed at ending U.S. mid-air refueling of Saudi war planes and Washington's additional assistance for the Saudi war effort (at least until the war is explicitly authorized by Congress). The bill generated a [vigorous debate](#). In the end, on an issue that wouldn't have even come to the floor two years ago, an unprecedented 44 senators voted to halt this country's support for the Saudi war effort. The bill nonetheless went down to defeat and the suffering in Yemen continues.

Debate about the merits of that brutal war was, however, the last thing on the mind of a president who views his bear-hug embrace of the Saudi regime as a straightforward business proposition. He's so enthusiastic about selling arms to Riyadh that he even brought his very own prop to the White House meeting with bin Salman: a U.S. [map](#) highlighting which of the 50 states would benefit most from pending weapons sales to the prince's country.

You undoubtedly won't be surprised to learn that Michigan, Ohio, and Florida, the three crucial swing states in the 2016 presidential election, were specially highlighted. His latest

stunt only underscored a simple fact of his presidency: Trump's arms sales are meant to promote pork-barrel politics, while pumping up the profits of U.S. weapons manufacturers. As for human rights or human lives, who cares?

To be fair, Donald Trump is hardly the first American president to make it his business to aggressively promote weapons exports. Though seldom a highlighted part of his presidency, Barack Obama proved to be a weapons salesman par excellence. He made [more arms offers](#) in his two terms in office than any U.S. president since World War II, including an astounding [\\$115 billion](#) in weapons deals with Saudi Arabia. For the tiny group of us who follow such things, that map of Trump's only underscored a familiar reality.

On it, in addition to the map linking U.S. jobs and arms transfers to the Saudis, were little boxes that highlighted four specific weapons sales worth tens of billions of dollars. [Three of those](#) that included the THAAD missile defense system, C-130 transport planes, P-8 anti-submarine warfare planes, and Bradley armored vehicles were, in fact, completed during the Obama years. So much for Donald Trump's claim to be a deal maker the likes of which we've never seen before. You might, in fact, say that the truest arms race these days is between American presidents, not the United States and other countries. Not only has the U.S. been the world's [top](#) arms exporting nation throughout this century, but last year it [sold](#) one and a half times as much weaponry as its closest rival, Russia.

Embracing Lockheed Martin

It's worth noting that three of those four Saudi deals involved weapons [made by Lockheed Martin](#). Admittedly, Trump's relationship with Lockheed got off to a rocky start in December 2016 when he [tweeted](#) his displeasure over the cost of that company's F-35 combat aircraft, the [most expensive](#) weapons program ever undertaken by the Pentagon. Since then, however, relations between the nation's largest defense contractor and America's most self-involved president have warmed considerably.

Before Trump's May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia, his son-in-law, **Jared Kushner**, new [best buddy](#) to Mohammed bin Salman, was put in charge of cobbling together a smoke-and-mirrors, wildly [exaggerated](#) \$100 billion-plus [arms package](#) that Trump could announce in Riyadh. What Kushner needed was a list of sales or potential sales that his father-in-law could boast about (even if many of the deals had been made by Obama). So he [called](#) Lockheed Martin CEO Marillyn Hewson to ask if she could cut the price of a THAAD anti-missile system that the administration wanted to include in the package. She agreed and the [\\$15 billion](#) THAAD deal — still a huge price tag and the most lucrative sale to the Saudis made by the Trump administration — went forward. To sweeten the pot for the Saudi royals, the Pentagon even [waived](#) a \$3.5 billion fee normally required by law and designed to reimburse the Treasury for the cost to American taxpayers of developing such a major weapons system. General Joseph Rixey, until recently the director of the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which granted that waiver, has since [gone](#) directly through Washington's revolving door and been hired by — you guessed it — Lockheed Martin.

In addition, former Lockheed Martin executive **John Rood** is now the Trump administration's [undersecretary of defense for policy](#), where one of his responsibilities will be to weigh in on... don't be shocked!... major arms deals. In his confirmation hearings, Rood refused to say that he would recuse himself from transactions involving his former employer, for which he was denounced by Senators **John McCain** and **Elizabeth Warren**.

As Warren [asserted](#) in a speech opposing Rood's appointment,

"No taxpayer should have to wonder whether the top policy-makers at the Pentagon are pushing defense products and foreign military sales for reasons other than the protection of the United States of America... No American should have to wonder whether the Defense Department is acting to protect the national interests of our nation or the financial interests of the five giant defense contractors."

Still, most senators were unfazed and Rood's nomination sailed through that body by a vote of 81 to 7. He is now positioned to help smooth the way for any Lockheed Martin deal that might meet with a discouraging word from the Pentagon or State Department officials charged with vetting foreign arms sales.

Arming the Planet

Though Saudi Arabia may be the largest recipient of U.S. arms on the planet, it's anything but Washington's only customer. According to the Pentagon's annual tally of major agreements under the Foreign Military Sales program, the most significant channel for U.S. arms exports, Washington entered into formal agreements to sell weaponry to [130 nations](#) in 2016 (the most recent year for which full data is available). According to a recent [report](#) from the Cato Institute, between 2002 and 2016 the United States delivered weaponry to 167 countries — more than 85% of the nations on the planet. The Cato report also notes that, between 1981 and 2010, Washington supplied some form of weaponry to 59% of all nations engaged in high-level conflicts.

In short, Donald Trump has headed down a well-traveled arms superhighway. Every president since **Richard Nixon** has taken that same road and, in 2010, the Obama administration managed to rack up a record \$102 billion in foreign arms offers. In a recent [report](#) I wrote for the Security Assistance Monitor at the Center for International Policy, I documented more than \$82 billion in arms offers by the Trump administration in 2017 alone, which actually represented a slight increase from the \$76 billion in offers made during President Obama's final year. It was, however, far lower than that 2010 figure, [\\$60 billion](#) of which came from Saudi deals for F-15 combat aircraft, Apache attack helicopters, transport aircraft, and armored vehicles, as well as guns and ammunition.

There have nonetheless been some differences in the approaches of the two administrations in the area of human rights. Under pressure from human rights groups, the Obama administration did, in the end, [suspend](#) sales of aircraft to Bahrain and Nigeria, both of whose militaries were significant human rights violators, and also a \$1 billion-plus deal for precision-guided bombs to Saudi Arabia. That [Saudi suspension](#) represented the first concrete action by the Obama administration to express displeasure with Riyadh's indiscriminate bombing campaign in Yemen. Conducted largely with U.S. and British supplied aircraft, bombs, and missiles, it has included [strikes](#) against hospitals, marketplaces, water treatment facilities, and even a funeral. In keeping with his focus on jobs to the exclusion of humanitarian concerns, Trump [reversed](#) all three of the Obama suspensions shortly after taking office.

Fueling Terrorism and Instability

In fact, selling weapons to dictatorships and repressive regimes often fuels instability, war,

and terrorism, as the American war on terror has vividly demonstrated for the last nearly 17 years. U.S.-supplied arms also have a nasty habit of ending up in the hands of America's adversaries. At the height of the U.S. intervention in Iraq, for instance, that country's armed forces lost track of [hundreds of thousands](#) of rifles, many of which made their way into the hands of forces resisting the U.S. occupation.

In a similar fashion, when Islamic State militants [swept](#) into Iraq in 2014, the Iraqi security forces abandoned [billions of dollars worth](#) of American equipment, from small arms to military trucks and armored vehicles. ISIS promptly put them to use against U.S. advisers and the Iraqi security forces as well as tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians. The Taliban, too, has gotten its hands on [substantial quantities](#) of U.S. weaponry, either on the battlefield or by buying them at cut-rate, black market prices from corrupt members of the Afghan security forces.

In northern Syria, two U.S.-armed groups are now fighting each other. Turkish forces are [facing off](#) against Syrian Kurdish militias that have been among the most effective anti-ISIS fighters and there is even an ongoing risk that U.S. and Turkish forces, NATO allies, may find themselves in direct combat with each other. Far from giving Washington influence over key allies or improving their combat effectiveness, U.S. arms and training often simply spur further conflict and chaos to the detriment of the security of the United States, not to speak of the peace of the world.

In the grim and devolving conflict in Yemen, for instance, all sides possess at least some U.S. weaponry. Saudi Arabia is, of course, the top U.S. arms client and its forces are a [catalogue](#) of American weaponry, from planes and anti-tank missiles to cluster bombs, but [hundreds of millions](#) of dollars in U.S. military aid were also provided to the forces of Yemeni autocrat **Ali Abdullah Saleh** during his 30 years of rule before he was driven from power in 2012. Later, however, he [joined forces](#) with the Houthi rebels against the Saudi-led intervention, taking large parts of the Yemeni armed forces — and their U.S.-supplied weapons — with him. (He would himself be [assassinated](#) by Houthi forces late last year after a falling out.)

Trump's Plan: Make It Easier on Arms Makers

The Trump administration is poised to release a new policy directive on global arms transfers. A [report](#) by *Politico*, based on interviews with sources at the State Department and a National Security Council (NSC) official, suggests that it will seek to further streamline the process of approving arms sales, in part by increasing the already extensive role of U.S. government personnel in promoting such exports. It will also remove what a National Security Council statement has described as “unreasonable constraints on the ability of our companies to compete.” In keeping with that priority, according to the NSC official, “the administration is intent on ensuring that U.S. industry has every advantage in the global marketplace.”

In January, a Reuters [article](#) confirmed this approach, reporting that the forthcoming directive would emphasize arms-sales promotion by U.S. diplomats and other overseas personnel. As one administration official told Reuters, “We want to see those guys, the commercial and military attaches, unfettered to be salesmen for this stuff, to be promoters.”

The Trump administration is also expected to move forward with a plan, stalled as the Obama years ended, to [ease controls](#) on the export of U.S. firearms. Gun exports now

licensed and scrutinized by the State Department would instead be put under the far-less-stringent jurisdiction of the Commerce Department. Some firearms could then be exported to allies without even a license, reducing the government's ability to prevent them from reaching criminal networks or the security forces of potential adversaries.

In September 2017, Democratic senators **Ben Cardin**, **Dianne Feinstein**, and **Patrick Leahy** sent a letter to then-**Secretary of State Rex Tillerson** raising concerns about such a change. As they [wrote](#),

“Combat firearms and ammunition are uniquely lethal; they are easily spread and easily modified, and are the primary means of injury, death and destruction in civil and military conflicts throughout the world. As such they should be subjected to more — not less — rigorous export controls and oversight.”

If Trump's vision of an all-arms-sales-all-the-time foreign policy is realized, he may scale the weapons-dealing heights reached by the Obama administration. As Washington's arms-dealer-in-chief, he might indeed succeed in selling American weaponry as if there were no tomorrow. Given the known human costs of unbridled arms trafficking, however, such a presidency would also ensure that whatever tomorrow finally arrived would prove far worse than today, unless of course you happen to be a major U.S. arms maker.

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