On his first two days on the job as America’s newly designated ambassador to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, South Carolinian John C. West gave notice that he would be no ordinary diplomat. These were the tension-filled spring days of 1977, as Americans were discovering the realities and consequences of their dependence on oil from the Middle East, and the issue of Israeli-Arab peace was taking on new dimensions of urgency. The choice of West to the delicate Saudi post had already sent ripples through the State Department’s career corps at a time when an experienced diplomat for the post might have been preferred by many.

Instead President Jimmy Carter had chosen a man who was a small-town lawyer by trade and—like Carter—a southern governor by political orientation. West had neither a background in the ways of Muslim nations nor any particular experience in the highly charged world of Middle East conflict or petrodollar economies. He was, in the eyes of some, another of President Jimmy Carter’s down-home selections that reflected more his own sense of personal values than it did any degree of political sophistication. Saudi Arabia, it seemed, was hardly the place to break in a rookie diplomat in the spring of 1977.

“To say that West was an unknown quantity when he arrived in Saudi Arabia was an understatement,” the chronicler Sandra Mackey wrote. “The
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professional diplomats were horrified that Saudi Arabia’s major ally was forcing a back-slapping, hand-pressing Southern politician on the austere Saudis. Despite the predictions of disaster, the jovial West, seasoned by years on the campaign trail, applied just the right amount of graciousness and diffidence to charm his hosts.”¹

For those alarmed at West’s appointment, there was ample reason to believe that the Saudi assignment should have merited a diplomatic professional. The Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular had become places of rapidly escalating economic urgency and inescapable political vulnerability for American interests. While there lingered the popular public image of Saudi Arabia as a place of political intrigue, religious eccentricity, and despotic personal rule, the compelling reality was that Arab-controlled petroleum resources could make or break entire Western economies, a lesson the world had learned painfully only a few years earlier. The term “OPEC,” the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, formed in 1960 at the initiative of Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, struck a forbidding tone to many Americans who recognized their nation’s dependence on overseas energy sources and their vulnerability to the manipulation of those sources. The very name of Saudi oil minister Ahmed Zaki Yamani set off alarms and anxieties among the gasoline-dependent societies of the affluent, industrialized nations, where memories were fresh of the OPEC-sponsored price increases four years earlier to protest American military support of Israel against Syria and Egypt. The increase had sent the U.S. economy into a tailspin and had been particularly damaging to the travel-oriented states of Georgia and South Carolina, where Jimmy Carter and John West respectively served as governors at the time.

The energy crisis was of such magnitude that the Richard Nixon–Gerald Ford administrations (1972–76) unleashed its biggest diplomatic weapons to address the troubles in the Middle East, including the considerable skills of Henry Kissinger, in the wake of the skyrocketing oil prices of 1973. In this instance even the remarkable Kissinger touch proved less than equal to the task. “Henry Kissinger [lost] credibility with the Arabs,” the retired oil executive George Ballou told Jeffrey Robinson, the author of a biography of Saudi oil minister Sheikh Zaki Yamani. “The ’73 war ended up with Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy. And the Arabs still feel they were done in by Kissinger. From their point of view, I think they were right.”²

Onto that stage in May 1977 strode John Carl West, who would have been the first to admit he was not a Henry Kissinger or even a wannabe Kissinger. He sensed the Arab suspicions of Kissinger. “His method of operation,” West said of Kissinger, “was to tell each side what he thought they wanted to hear in
a sufficiently clever way that they couldn’t actually say that it was an outright lie. But none of the Arabs trusted him. They respected his capacity, but they didn’t trust him.”

DIPLOMACY, SOUTHERN FAMILY STYLE

As an antidote to the scowling Kissinger, West may have been short on diplomatic guile, but he was long on personal charm. Carter intended for the appointment of the cheerful southerner to be a bold message to the Saudis not merely of a budding new friendship but of a friendship that carried family-like status. Carter was not only sending his personal friend John West to represent American interests in the eccentric desert kingdom; he was also endowing West with special privilege within American diplomatic circles, direct twenty-four-hour access to the president and the White House.
President Carter said, “When John West went to Saudi Arabia . . . I told [him] . . . that he should relate directly to me . . . and I authorized him to let the Saudi leadership know that whenever there was a crisis or a problem or a personal sensitivity issue that John West could talk directly to me and the White House or write me a personal letter and not go through the vast bureaucracy that might involve dozens of people.”

This status was extended to only two other ambassadors at the time, the former labor leader Leonard Woodcock in China and Philip Austin in Australia. According to Carter, “We didn’t have diplomatic relations with China then and the other one [Austin] just happened to be a close friend of mine . . . [who] maintained the right to communicate directly with me.”

What ensued in Saudi Arabia with John West were four years of informal, often unconventional, and at times blatantly unorthodox statesmanship that made West an unabashed Saudi advocate in Washington circles, a trusted insider within the elite society of Saudi royalty, and something of a pariah to powerful pro-Israeli interests in the United States. For all the fractured procedural orthodoxy occasioned by such style and behavior, it was part of an overall Carter initiative to make friends with the world, one nation at a time, and to find new inroads into what had become the abscessed infection of Middle East tensions.

By one count, President Carter met with more than forty heads of state in his first year in office—more than Kennedy, Johnson, or Nixon in comparable periods in their administrations. By another count, the president’s first meeting with the shah of Iran in November 1977 was his sixty-sixth personal contact with either a head of state or a head of government that year. At a time when Israel was viewed internationally as the special and favored friend of the United States in the Middle East, Carter was sending signals that he was willing to take risks and to initiate unprecedented overtures to Arab nations in efforts to build American credibility and acceptance as an evenhanded arbiter in the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

Another southern governor who became president, Bill Clinton, followed the Carter precedent of appointing southern politicians as ambassadors to Saudi Arabia—namely, former Mississippi governor Ray Mabus and onetime Georgia senator Wyche Fowler. “In the decades since J. Rives Childs took up residence in Jeddah as the first American Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, the post had generally been filled by one of two types of appointee,” Thomas Lippman wrote in a study of Saudi Arabia: “career diplomats who specialized in the Arab world, such as Parker Hart, Hermann F. Eilts, Richard Murphy and Hume Moran; and prominent Southern politicians who lacked expertise but functioned as personal representatives of the president who appointed them.”
PERSONAL POLITICS ON A BIG STAGE

Among the Saudis, Carter’s newly designated ambassador, John West, would prove from day one to be an early and eager symbol of that aggressive new friendship with the Saudi kingdom. His transparent advocacy of the desert kingdom caused some observers to wonder whether he was the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia or the other way around. He admitted in one of his frequent handwritten letters to Carter five months later, “I recognize that an occupational hazard of an ambassador is to become too imbued with the point of view of the country he represents.” Whatever may have been the grumbling among the orthodox careerists at Foggy Bottom, John West made it known from the outset that he intended to be his own man, exploiting his special status with the president when necessary, and that he would carry out the mission as he saw fit, with or without State Department blessing.

His first day on the job set an unmistakable precedent. It was a critical day in the early diplomatic life of the Carter administration, the day when Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdul Aziz and an official delegation from Saudi Arabia arrived in Washington, D.C., for a state visit. It was not the first contact between the Saudis and the new president’s administration, but it would provide the occasion for critical head-to-head meetings between the leaders of the two nations. The Saudis’ visit was the last of five introductory meetings for Carter with key leaders in the Middle East, beginning with then Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in March 1977 and followed in succession by summits with Egypt’s Anwar Sadat in early April, King Hussein bin Talal of Jordan later that month, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria in early May, and concluding with Fahd on May 24.

West, whose appointment had not been formally announced at the time, accompanied Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to Andrews Air Force Base to greet the Saudi party. While it would be his first experience as the official U.S. ambassador, he had already begun to measure the dimensions of the assignment and to form some personal opinions.

One of them was his belief that the State Department was making a mistake in ordering the retirement of one Isa Sabbagh, a U.S. employee in the Saudi embassy, upon his sixtieth birthday. Sabbagh was a Palestinian, and West had learned reliably that he was the best Arab linguist in the country. He had the confidence of the Saudi community in the delicate—and often diplomatically tinged—task of translations. As it turned out, there was a slight delay in the landing of the Saudi party’s plane, allowing just enough time for West to ask Vance to waive the mandatory retirement requirement for Sabbagh. West and Vance had formed a friendship earlier as members of the Southern Center for
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International Studies in Atlanta, and the secretary readily concurred in the request. It would prove to be an important step in building West’s embassy team and forging the kind of linkages critical to carrying out his assignment of gaining the personal trust of his new Saudi colleagues. It also established that he would not hesitate to incur lower-level State Department displeasure in getting his job done.

Minutes after securing Secretary Vance’s support for Sabbagh’s continued employment, West stepped out of a flagged State Department limo and met for the first time two of the most important people in the world’s petroleum-driven economy: Crown Prince Fahd, who would become king five years later; and Prince Saud al-Faisal, who had been deputy oil minister for five years prior to becoming the nation’s foreign minister in 1975.

It was a moment, West recorded later that day in his journal, that gave him the opportunity to make more personal assessments. Saud, he noted, was “a son of King Faisal and bears a striking resemblance to him. Saud is a graduate of Princeton and a very striking looking individual. I am told he is completely honest and extremely attractive to the ladies. I can see why.”9 Friends would later vow that the young Saudi prince bore a striking resemblance to a movie idol of the time, the Egyptian Omar Sharif, “only better, because he was taller,” according to the Wests’ daughter, Shelton. “He’s exactly what you’d think an Arabian Knight would look like. Absolutely stunning.”10

Day two proved to be even more adventuresome for the fledgling and already-unorthodox ambassador. It began amid formalities and trappings of his new position. As he arrived with his wife, Lois, for the first official visit to the White House, West paused to survey a new perspective, for the first time as an insider, and to admit to himself that he was awed: “Lois and I walked up on the South Lawn where the arrival ceremonies [for the Saudis] were to take place. It was a beautiful day and an impressive sight. From the rear entrance of the White House, you can see the Washington Monument on the left and the Jefferson Memorial on the right. The expanse of green, with shrubs, is truly impressive.”11

The day would also produce West’s first opportunity to participate in upper-level policy talks and to inject his Saudi-friendly opinion into the discussions. A meeting had been called to bring State Department and Defense Department officials together with the Saudi party to discuss a matter of special delicacy at the time, mutual defense interests and, most prominently, the sale of U.S. fighter jets to Saudi Arabia. The issue had been left unresolved by the departing Ford administration, except for an eleventh-hour pledge by outgoing deputy defense secretary William Clement that the Saudis should get the
sophisticated F-15 aircrafts, long-range interceptor jets considered at the time to be the best of their kind in the world—and which had also already been promised to Israel and the Iranian government of the shah. The F-15s were the ones the Saudis wanted, and West quickly made it known that they were his choice as well.

**THE SAUDI PREFERENCE OF FIGHTER JETS**

West wrote:

I told them I felt we should honor the commitment (of the Ford administration) with the understanding that it did require the approval of the Congress, which we would endeavor to get. I was pleased, surprised and delighted when this view was adopted.

Later I found out that the State Department had recommended a different approach, namely that we would offer them a long-range fighter, but we would try to get them to take the F-16, which they [the Saudis] did not want. The decision [to sell the F-15] was made by the President . . . and the Saudis were extremely pleased.12

President Carter later recalled one of the outcomes of the sale. “After I went out of office, Iran launched an air attack against Saudi Arabia. And the Saudis sent up two F-15s and they shot down the Iranian planes before they ever crossed the border,” he said.13

The sale would not become final until after subsequent congressional battles that brought into play the heavy artillery of the Carter administration and the deeply committed pro-Israeli lobbies. The congressional fight over the F-15 sale to the Saudis would draw deep lines separating the two sides and would prove to be a dramatic turning point in Carter’s carefully sketched Middle East strategies.

For the moment, however, in those days of late May 1977, Carter, Vance, and their new ambassador, John West, were making important headway with their friendship initiatives with the Saudis. In recommending the F-15s, West also found himself for the second time in twenty-four hours at variance with State Department functionaries, a posture that he later observed wryly had earned him a kind of rigorous oversight and treatment “worse than my freshman year hazing at The Citadel.”14 For all the torment he was creating for the Foggy Bottom denizens, West was taking the first steps toward an eventual position of remarkable trust and access within the eccentric Arab kingdom.

“He became the most effective and successful diplomat Saudi Arabia had ever seen,” Carter later said.15 West capped off his second day on the job with
more personal politics. Walking out of a policy meeting in the company of Crown Prince Fahd and President Carter, West heard Fahd tell the president that his (Fahd’s) four-year-old son had Carter’s picture and considered him one of his heroes. West turned to the Saudi prince and suggested that he should meet Amy, the president’s then nine-year-old daughter, and Fahd agreed. “That night after dinner,” West wrote, “the President took the Prince upstairs to Amy’s room, woke her, and said, ‘How would you like to meet an Arabian Prince?’ Amy was sleepy, but gracious, and the Prince was quite taken by her. I knew he would be.”

The two days had been productive ones for Carter, Vance, and other U.S. leaders. Talks had ranged from issues of Saudi defense and security to discussions of Arab-Israeli relations and the chances for peace in the region. Fahd had been upbeat and had reported that a recent meeting of Sadat, Assad, an emissary of King Hussein, and Fahd in Riyadh had convinced the Saudi leader that “this would be an especially auspicious year to find a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli problem.” Vance later wrote, “The talks ended on a warm and friendly note.”

FINDING THE SAUDI COMFORT ZONE

For West his first two days on the job had been heady ones, and he had gained even more confidence from the Saudis by retaining Isa Sabbagh. “In meetings with the Saudis, he was the interpreter,” West later recalled. “He had the absolute confidence of King Khalid and Prince Fahd.”

For their part, the Saudis were comfortable too and reciprocated in style and in kind. Zaki Yamani’s biographer Jeffrey Robinson recalled West’s first extended meeting with Yamani, the much-feared broker of oil prices and supplies within the OPEC cartel:

The Saudi oil minister invited the new American Ambassador to meet with him in a relaxed, informal setting at his summer home at Taif. They sat outside on wicker furniture next to the pool, drinking fruit juice, chatting amicably for about 10–15 minutes.

Once West felt he had paid his respects, he stood up and told Yamani that he’d only stopped by to say hello. He told Yamani that he didn’t want to take up any more of his time. But Yamani motioned to West to stay. He said, “I’m happy to see you and anyway you’ve already spent more time with me than your predecessor ever did.”

It was the beginning of an especially warm and long friendship.

West’s friendship with Yamani would prove particularly useful as the American ambassador became an increasingly trusted insider among the Saudis and
could gain advance knowledge of critical moves in economically sensitive areas such as OPEC’s decisions on oil pricing and supply. On a bigger scale, it also fit into the Carter administration’s growing realization that the troubles of the Middle East were more than a two-dimensional struggle between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The shadings and the shifting subtleties of relations among the Arab states themselves had also become a matter of interest and concern, and having John West in Saudi Arabia as an active and reliable sounding post, confidant, and communications linkage at the crossroads of Arab financial and political exchanges became a matter of keen value.

Secretary of State Vance would later write:

The interrelationship between Arab oil, the industrialized West’s strategic and economic interests in Middle East stability, the sharpening focus of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Third World, and the incalculable impact of a fifth major Arab-Israeli war on the United States fundamentally altered our stake in achieving a peaceful and lasting solution of the conflict.

Moreover, conservative states such as Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf sheikdoms, and moderate leaders such as President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan, shared concerns that Arab radicalism, feeding on the Arab-Israeli confrontation, could provide a base for the expansion of Soviet influence.

Moderate Arab leaders understood they could not shake the U.S. commitment to the security of Israel, but they believed the clear American national interest in stability in the Middle East gave them significant leverage in seeking an acceptable political settlement.

While the Carter administration agreed with its predecessors on the priority attention given to U.S. political, strategic, and economic interests in the Middle East, it concluded that the step-by-step diplomacy of the Nixon-Ford strategists “had exhausted its potential.”

“Carter and his senior foreign policy advisers believed that the time had come to go beyond the Kissinger approach of step-by-step negotiation,” Robert A. Strong reported in his 2000 assessment of Carter foreign policy, noting that such a strategy would eventually lead to a U.S. push to bring Middle East states together in a multilateral conference at Geneva. “No one was quite sure what could, or would, happen if all the Middle East diplomatic issues—territorial, political and military—were placed on the same negotiating table,” Strong wrote, “but it seemed worth a try. And given the growing importance of Middle East oil to the international economy, successful peace negotiations offered the additional payoff of greater global economic stability.”
Carter had also injected into his administration by that time the strain of personal faith and public morality that—coming only three years after the Watergate scandal had driven Richard Nixon from office—had brought to his presidency what some considered to be a refreshing and upbeat component and what others believed to be troublesome and disingenuous distractions. Only days before the arrival of Crown Prince Fahd for the official Saudi Arabian visit in May 1977, President Carter had raised some eyebrows in Washington with a Sunday speech at Notre Dame University that suggested at least to some that the administration was trying “to recapture the high ground of ‘moral authority’ in the world.” One analyst, a Washington Post reporter named Murray Marder, likened the speech directly to Carter’s campaign swats at the “Nixon-Ford-Kissinger” administration for its “secret deals” and “policy by manipulation,” and Vice President Walter Mondale described elements of Carter’s policies as being designed to make “most Americans feel good.” Kissinger, the analyst noted, “used to dismiss this kind of language in private, and sometimes even in public, as ‘moralizing’ or ‘sermonizing.’ In the end, the charge that Kissinger scorned morality became his heaviest burden.”

Whatever the impact of the Notre Dame speech and whatever the lingering perceptions of the previous administration may have been, Carter’s designation of West as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia was consistent with initiatives interpreted as distancing the new administration from the scarred legacy of its predecessors. “I understand fully the limits of moral suasion,” Carter had said at Notre Dame. “I have no illusion that changes will come easily or soon. But I also believe that it is a mistake to undervalue the power of words and of the idea that words embody.”

The new strategies for the Middle East might also have contained a significant understanding that “step-by-step” diplomacy had fallen short because, in part, it implied that progress toward peace—particularly among the Arab nations—would follow a linear path. Such would not be the case. It was one thing to understand what lay on the surface of disputes in the Middle East in terms of territorial, political, and military issues; it was quite another thing to fathom the hidden intricacies and nuances of Arab style and diplomacy. Arab nations, and particularly the Saudis, often functioned in ways that defied the application of Western logic or predictability. Theirs was a highly personal and often fatalistic view of the world.

As described by the analyst David E. Long in 1976, “Saudis feel less inclined than Westerners to make their behavior appear consistent; like Orientals, their thinking is compartmentalized. Thus, political, business and personal