

Mideast Deja Vu

Feb 4, 2007



Articles & Testimony

Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present by Michael B. Oren (W.W. Norton & Co., 672 pages, \$35).

"Congress balks at funding Mideast war against 'terrorists.' "

"Evangelicals lobby on behalf of the Jewish state."

"Washington exports ideals of democracy and freedom to Arab nations."

All these headlines, which could have been lifted from today's newspapers, apply just as accurately to episodes from America's surprisingly rich and riveting two-centuries-old engagement with the Middle East.

Indeed, in his magisterial history of the relationship between the United States and the Middle East, Michael Oren provides an exhaustively researched and compellingly told exercise in *deja vu*.

This is not a book about the Middle East, though Middle Easterners -- Arabs, Turks, Israelis and others -- fill its pages. This is a book about America and, more importantly, Americans -- the people who not only shaped a young nation's understanding of a world far away but who often, and at great personal risk, tried to shape (with infrequent success) the beliefs and actions of that faraway world itself.

Oren's engrossing narrative reads like a who's who of American history. Every American of note, from early Puritan preachers to the Founding Fathers through impassioned abolitionists and iconic Civil War heroes, seems to have had a Middle East moment that shaped his world view.

Even the historical footnotes are fascinating. We learn that one of Lincoln's assassins was caught escaping to Egypt and that the Statue of Liberty was originally conceived as a veiled Muslim woman who would grace the entrance of the Suez Canal.

Most striking is the consistency of themes across generations. Americans encountering the Middle East are uniformly idealistic, driven by faith, slow to war and undeterred by rejection or failure.

Presidents were confounded by Barbary pirates. Hardy missionaries tilted at windmills for converts and Union veterans exported civic ideals -- and state-of-the-art weaponry -- to an Egypt in decline.

From the earliest days of the Republic, antipathy toward Islam, coupled with ignorance about Islam, ran deep. No less deep and abiding has been, for more than 200 years, the Christian commitment to help the Jews return to Zion, which -- until the era of Louis Brandeis -- was even more powerful than the commitment of American Jews themselves.

Oren is a wonderful storyteller. The ability to move from minute-by-minute chronicling to sketching the grand sweep of history is no easy feat, but he does so with elegance and a flair for the dramatic.

With the body count of both Iraqis and Americans rising daily, critics will rail against Oren's central conclusion, that "on balance, Americans historically brought far more beneficence than avarice to the Middle East and caused

significant less harm than good."

Yes, we have made our mistakes, sometimes over and over again, and our motives have not always been selfless or pure. But, as Oren underscores, Americans never set out to colonize the Middle East, as did the other Great Powers. We really have risked American lives to save those of Arabs and Muslims. A disinterested observer has to concede that Oren is right.

Robert Satloff, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands](#)

[\(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255>\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255). ❖

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