

**Matthew F. Jacobs.** *Imagining the Middle East: The Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918-1967*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 317 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3488-6.



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In the study of empire, the way in which systems of knowledge production are required to guide decision makers and bureaucrats frequently comes second to analyses of the exercise of military and economic power. This is surprising given that knowledge production is inextricably entwined with the exercise of all other forms of power, and that empires rely as much on cultural and ideological power--"soft power"--as they do on material or "hard" forms of power. In *Imagining the Middle East*, Matthew F. Jacobs provides an interesting and quite informative analysis of the construction and evolution of the knowledge production system that has been central to American imperial policy in the Middle East over the past one hundred years and remains so today, even if he does not frame his study in such theoretical terms.

In the book, Jacobs describes the ways in which an informal network of academics, businessmen, government officials, journalists, and others interested in the Middle East and concerned about growing American involvement in

the region started to coalesce into an identifiable group after World War I. Their aim was to guide and shape American foreign policy toward the region with policy advice based on systematic academic study and research of the region and its peoples. He goes on to describe the evolution of this network over the next fifty or so years in terms of its key individuals, groups, and organizations; its central relationships and processes; its influence; and the main phases of its evolution. More important, he explains and dissects some of the key ideas and imaginative frames produced by this network for policymakers, the central debates and points of contention between different factions within it, and the evolution of some of the imaginative frames about the Middle East over the decades. For example, he describes the Orientalist roots of the early imaginings of the Middle East, as well as later intellectual contests between different parts of the network over the nature and potential threat posed by political Islam, and the costs to American interests of supporting Israel.

Overall, the book provides an interesting and thoughtful analysis of how a network of experts and intellectuals came to produce the core imaginative frames that American policymakers have since adopted toward the Middle East. Meticulously researched, well organized, eloquently written, and full of genuine insights, Jacobs's book has done a real service in systematically documenting the nature and evolution of this network, its role in foreign policy formulation, and some of its enduring legacies on American foreign policy toward the Middle East. Moreover, *Imagining the Middle East* provides an important complement to related studies on other areas of intellectual production for politics, such as the role of foundations and think tanks in American foreign policy promotion (by Inderjeet Parmar and Diane Stone); the political role of the academy (by Michael McKinley, Noam Chomsky, and others); and more recently, the rise of the influential "terrorism industry" and its "embedded experts" (by Lisa Stampnitzky, John Burnett, and Dave Whyte). [1] Together, Jacobs's book and these other studies help to map and elucidate the role of knowledge production systems in the maintenance of American hegemony. As such, this book will be of genuine interest to sociologists of science and expertise, scholars of American empire, and discourse analysts, as well as intellectual historians, diplomatic historians, and anyone interested in American foreign policy and its relations with the Middle East over the past fifty years.

Despite its undoubted strengths and contributions, however, it is hard to avoid a sense that the book never quite reaches the depths of insight and interpretation that the rich empirical material it is based on promises. This is primarily because, in the first instance, the study does not employ any explicit theoretical framework or set of analytical tools capable of generating a deeper level of explanation and analysis. Rather, based on a broad analytical history case study approach, employing archival and document research, interviews, and forms of content analysis and network

analysis, the study is modest in its findings and often a little descriptive in its conclusions. I felt that rigorously applying any one of several relevant theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts would have yielded a great many genuinely original insights into such issues as the operation and effects of power-knowledge in foreign policymaking, the ideological role of knowledge in the maintenance of hegemony, the discursive construction of policy, the role of norm entrepreneurs, and the sources of discursive change and sedimentation--among others. For example, one cannot help but think that what is being described in the book is the formation and evolution of a powerful "epistemic community" or the operation of "organic intellectuals," and that the application of some form of critical discourse analysis (CDA), critical theory, or Gramscian analysis would yield important insights into the ideological effects of the key frames and narratives generated by the network about the Middle East. Although readers can and will draw out such insights themselves--they are readily available throughout the text--the book itself would have been far stronger and more provocative if it had employed a well-elaborated theoretical framework relevant to the study of power-knowledge processes.

A second limitation of the study is its failure to link the present study with the broader context of the role of intellectual production and "embedded experts" in the rise and maintenance of American hegemony. In part, this is the result of the lack of a theoretical framework noted above which could account for the way power-knowledge operates at multiple levels of American society. As a consequence, the book fails to explicitly link the rise and function of this Middle East network to the crucial role played more broadly by foundations, think tanks, and universities in the projection of American power abroad. Surprisingly, it does not even note the revolving door between state officials and intellectual production, or the deep involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), for example, in virtually all

the major networks and institutions of knowledge production in America. In this case, Jacobs reveals the central role played by both former government officials and CIA officers in the Middle East network, but then fails to examine the effects of such close ties between state and academics on the knowledge produced.

Finally, the book lacks an explicit and forceful critical-normative evaluation of the role of the Middle East network and the foreign policies that it helped to shape and construct. As before, readers can draw their own conclusions about the consequences that have resulted from the entrenched Orientalism and Eurocentrism at the heart of the American imaginings about the Middle East; the resultant blowback from numerous disastrous interventions that continues to dog American policy in the region; or the negative social and political consequences of American policies for the people of the region (such as the support given to a great many authoritarian regimes)--among others. However, such an open critique is perhaps too much to ask of a young scholar writing about a politically sensitive subject in an academic context where controversial opinions can have negative career consequences.

In the end, even in the absence of a strong theoretical or explicit normative orientation, *Imagining the Middle East* is a fine piece of historical scholarship which makes a valuable contribution to a crucial area of public policy. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in trying to understand America's approach to the Middle East region or in learning about the way knowledge production functions in the maintenance of American hegemony.

Note

[1]. Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (Lon-

don: Frank Cass, 1996); Michael McKinley, "The Co-option of the University and the Privileging of Annihilation," *International Relations* 18, no. 2 (2004): 151-172; Noam Chomsky and others, *The Cold War and the University: Towards an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: The New Press, 1997); Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts and Others Invented Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); and John Burnett and Dave Whyte, "Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism," *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1, no. 4 (2005): 1-18.

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