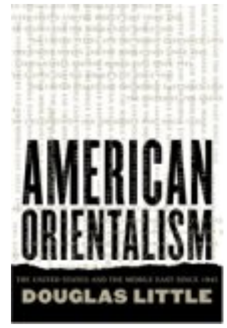
Douglas Little. ***American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945.*** Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 407 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2737-6.



Reviewed by Kail Ellis

Published on H-Levant (March, 2004)

American Orientalism

The title of Douglas Little's book evokes the late Edward Said's seminal work, ***Orientalism***. For Said, orientalism was the conceptual framework that rationalized Western colonialism and its attendant cultural and economic imperialism. It viewed the region and its peoples as essentially "dehumanized" and thereby justified Western domination. Where Said employed the concept to counter pathological stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as violent, backward, and driven by passion and religious fanaticism, Little employs it to explain American policy in the Middle East since 1945.

Little introduces his study with a cultural overview of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American popular culture that viewed Muslims, Jews, and other peoples of the Middle East as backward, decadent, and untrustworthy. He argues that this popular view was shaped in the early days of the republic when American statesmen employed it after their encounter with the Barbary pirates. It was further advanced by publications such as the ***National Geographic*** magazine with their depictions of the "exotic" Arab and Muslim. (Little makes several references to ***National Geographic*** in his work and it is interesting that in the October 2003 issue on Saudi Arabia the magazine's editor describes the story as "essential reading for those who won't settle for stereotypes.")

Mark Twain, whose travels to the Middle East were recorded in his popular and influential memoir, ***Innocents Abroad***, published in 1869, added to the American perception of Muslims as "a people by nature and training filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive [and] superstitious" (quoted, p. 13). Interestingly, Little also credits Twain as being "among the first to interpret the U.S. relationship with the Middle East as the byproduct of two contradictory ingredients: an irresistible impulse to remake the world in America's image and a profound ambivalence about the people to be remade" (p. 3). It is this irony that leads Little to his definition of American Orientalism: "a tendency to underestimate the people of the region and to overestimate America's ability to make a bad situation better."

Having established orientalism as a framework for his study, Little examines its influence on U.S. policy in the Middle East through a series of eight chapters, each of which is devoted to a single topic that leads to the next theme. The first theme Little discusses is the role of oil and how the multinational corporations established a symbiotic relationship with American policymakers to protect their interests in the region. His review of the formation of OPEC in the 1970s and the effect of the oil crisis on the American public after the October 1973 war is an excellent context for understanding the primacy of oil in the various Middle East conflicts. It was generally known that American oil executives influenced U.S. policy throughout the Middle East. But when the extent of their influence was exposed after the oil crisis hit the United States, and they were characterized as greedy corporate holders in collusion with Arab Sheiks, they responded by blaming America's energy woes on U.S. support for Israel. In the process, they precipitated a clash between domestic politics, lobbying groups, and international business.

Little expands on this discussion with a review of the role of special interest groups in the United States. It is Israel's development of nuclear weapons and its success in presenting itself as the United States's strategic asset and only reliable ally in the Middle East that is most significant from a policy standpoint. This, in turn, leads to a discussion of the next theme, the Cold War and the American response to Soviet expansionism in the Middle East.

Little begins this discussion by reviewing Great Britain's withdrawal from the Middle East after World War II, which coincided with the beginning of the Cold War. The expansion of the Soviet Union into the heart of Europe, along with Soviet aid to the Communist rebellion in Greece and the Soviet attempt to get Turkey to cede its two northwest provinces (Kars and Ardahan) and share control of the Straits, propelled the United States to exclude the Soviet Union as a player in the Middle East. Little examines this policy from the historical perspective of the four eponymous doctrines: Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Carter. His analysis of these doctrines and their effectiveness is an excellent recounting of U.S. diplomatic history in the region since the end of World War II. The author does not discuss the Reagan Doctrine in the context of the Middle East, since it pertained to destabilizing the Soviet Union by making its involvement in Afghanistan costly both in military and economic terms, yet Little does mention it in the global context of U.S. policy. There is a certain irony in the lessons of the conflict and the deteriorating situation in which the United States finds itself in Afghanistan today.

Little goes into more detail on the early history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East in the section dealing with the history of lost opportunities to obtain peace. These failed efforts begin with the unfortunate manner in which the emergence of the Arab nationalist movement under Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt was regarded as well as how Nasser's attempt to rid Egypt of British colonialism was interpreted and seen as inviting the Soviet Union into the region.

As a case study of lost opportunities, Nasser's Egypt is well chosen. The revolutionary officers who took power in Egypt in 1952 were interested in ending British colonialism, not in engaging in the Arab-Israeli conflict. What changed this, according to Nasser, was the Israeli raid on Gaza in February 1955 which proved to be the turning point of Egypt's conflict with Israel. Prior to the Israeli incursion, the border had been relatively quiet. According to Nasser, Egypt had done nothing to provoke such action and, in his words, it was "revenge for nothing." The raid served as a wake up call for Nasser and propelled him to seek arms from whatever source he could, including the Soviet bloc. This, however, carried with it an implicit invitation to the Soviets to enter the Middle East which, when coupled with his anti-British colonialism and his attempts to maintain "positive" neutrality in the east-west conflict, brought Nasser on to a collision course with the United States. In the world of John Foster Dulles, where neutralism in the Cold War was not acceptable, Nasser's policies came to be identified with the objectives of Soviet Communism, particularly after the 1956 Suez Crisis. Little's analysis of Dulles's "no neutralism" policy is a useful reminder of the antecedents of President George W. Bush's declaration to the world in a joint session of Congress after the September 11 attacks: "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."

One of the weapons used to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East was the Eisenhower Doctrine. Declared in 1957, the doctrine specified that the United States would use military force and economic aid to counter Soviet inroads in the Middle East. After the July 1958 Iraqi revolution, which overthrew the pro-Western monarchy and removed Iraq from the Western-sponsored Baghdad Pact, the United States invoked the doctrine to intervene in the Lebanese civil war which threatened the overthrow of the pro-Western Chamoun government. Justifying the intervention, President Eisenhower drew a parallel between the civil war in Lebanon, the Iraqi revolution and the "pattern of (Soviet) conquest with which we became familiar during the period of 1945-1950."[1]

Significantly, according to Little, American intervention in Lebanon was designed to give an important message to the Soviet Union. By its actions, the United States demonstrated that it would not only frustrate the Soviets' bid to become a Middle Eastern power but it would aid its allies when necessary. The intent of the Lebanese action was to show that the United States had the strategic capability to react swiftly with conventional armed forces even in response to small-scale or "brushfire" conflicts.

Countering Soviet influence in the Middle East proved to be but one stage in the United States's policy in the region. American policymakers concluded that modernization was also essential to achieving regional stability in the region. Little demonstrates how the United States attempted to forestall revolution in three countries (Iraq, Libya, and Iran) by initiating democratic and economic reforms. The attempt backfired, however, when leaders once deemed friendly to the United States were deposed, killed, or sent into exile. The plan failed for two basic reasons. First, modernization accelerated the revolution of rising expectations that culminated in the overthrow of the reactionary regimes they were designed to save. Second, the more the reactionary regimes became identified with westernization and economic growth, the more they were seen as betraying traditional Islamic values.

Although Henry Kissinger, Walt Rostow, and, later, Zbigniew Brzezinski grappled with the paradoxes of modernization, Little notes that it was Kissinger who finally admitted the limitations of the experiment. In his memoirs, Kissinger acknowledged that the American experience, based as it was on liberal political traditions, a mature industrial economy, and a strong middle class, was "not entirely relevant" for the Third World societies. In words reminiscent of the current imbroglio in Iraq, Kissinger stated that "nation-building depended crucially on the ability to establish political authority."

It is unfortunate that Little's analysis of modernization could not have included President Bush's November 7, 2003, address to the National Endowment for Democracy which called for the expansion of democracy in the Islamic world. Responding to the increasingly difficult situation in the Middle East and the criticisms of U.S. policies in Iraq, Bush asserted that "the prosperity, and social vitality and technological progress of a people are directly determined by the extent of their liberty. Freedom honors and unleashes human creativity--and creativity determines the strength and wealth of nations. Liberty is both the plan of

Heaven for humanity and the best hope for progress here on Earth."

Given the President's stated desire to promote democracy in the region, it is ironic that during the first few months of his administration, he distanced himself from the Middle East conflict because he saw no hope of resolving it in the near future. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, however, his administration is in the thick of nation-building in Afghanistan and establishing democracy in Iraq and through it, in the other Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East. All this is happening at a time when hope for a resolution of the Middle East conflict is at its lowest.

Little's analysis demonstrates that there are no facile solutions to the Middle East's problems. The Bush administration claimed that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime would provide a leaven for democratic change throughout the Middle East, including a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For others, however, this assertion was backward. The Arab-Israeli conflict, they point out, remains the prism through which most Arabs see the United States. Indeed, it would be puzzling if the Palestinian-Israeli conflict were not central in the minds of the Arab public. Since the creation of Israel in 1948, five major Arab-Israeli wars, each of which was devastating to the Arabs, have shaped the collective psychology of several generations. Indeed, the argument is the reverse: the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than the occupation and democratization of Iraq, would help democratization in the region.

Little's discussion of the objectives of the first Gulf war is also instructive. He demonstrates that the objectives of that war were not only to overturn Saddam's occupation of Kuwait but, more significantly, to break the "'Vietnam syndrome' that had curtailed armed U.S. intervention in regional conflicts for nearly two decades." To provide context for this goal, Little provides an overview of the involvement of U.S. presidents in the Middle East from Roosevelt to the first President Bush. He shows that the rejoicing that ensued after the first Gulf War was due primarily to its short duration (a hundred hours).

For the first Bush Administration, the successful conclusion of the war finally broke the "Vietnam Syndrome," which inhibited American intervention in world crises. The optimism proved to be premature. Even after the first Gulf war, few Americans were interested in sending U.S. troops to foreign countries, whether to nearby Haiti to counter civil unrest and promote stability, to prevent genocide in faraway Africa (Rwanda) or Europe (the former Yugoslavia), or to relieve starvation and engage in nation-building in Somalia. Little notes that the Clinton administration was divided on how best to thwart the alleged weapons of mass destruction harbored by Iraq. When Al-Qaeda operatives bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, for example, Clinton's response was to launch cruise missiles against bases in Afghanistan, not armed intervention. It was not until after September 11 and the Bush administration's successful attempt to link terrorism, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein that Americans began to wholeheartedly support military intervention abroad.

The success of the first Gulf War was not without its short-term benefits. Significantly, as Little shows, it helped to pave the way for Israeli-Palestinian negotations and the Oslo Accord in 1993. Little examines the hopes generated by the Oslo negotiations. The U.S. prescription of land for peace was the foundation for the agreement but, tragically, this foundation gave way to frustration and stalemate with the failure of Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories and its increased settlement activity in the Occupied Territories.

With the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, violence on both sides escalated. The terror campaign against Israeli civilians by radical Palestinian groups alienated world opinion and hardened the resolve of the Israelis not to negotiate under threat of violence. For its part, Israel engaged in "targeted" assassinations of the leaders of the radical Palestinian groups and inflicted severe damage on the Palestinian civilians through its bombing of refugee camps and Palestinian cities, and the blockade and closures of the territories which prevented Palestinians from earning their livelihoods. Palestinian hopelessness and despair increased at the same time Israelis began to despair of their own security. As a result, this chapter remains unfinished.

Little's diplomatic history is an excellent resource for students of the Middle East. Although much of the material covered will be familiar to those who are acquainted with the literature of the field, the study nevertheless presents a context from which to evaluate the fast pace of events that daily greet us from the region. In reading it, one finds oneself constantly contextualizing and making comparisons to events that have occurred after the book was written. This is the particular gift of this book and it will benefit students and specialists alike.

Little's writing style is lucid and the quotes which introduce his chapters beautifully complement his themes. The use of primary sources, oral histories and interviews, and government documents inform his careful analyses of the contradictions of U.S. policy. Moreover, he succeeds in maintaining the overall theme of orientalism throughout the book. Nowhere is this more evident that in his description of the current state of the U.S. psyche regarding the Middle East:

"Although there is greater appreciation for the complexities of the Muslim world than a generation ago, most Americans still view radical Islam as a cause for instant alarm. Having been fed a steady diet of books, films, and news reports depicting Arabs as demonic anti-Western *others* and Israelis as heroic pro-Western partners and having watched in horror the events of 11 September 2001, the American public understandably fears Osama bin Laden and cheers Aladdin."

Little's book goes far to help rectify that perception.

Note

[1]. Dwight D. Eisenhower, ***Waging Peace, 1956-1961*** (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 177.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant

Citation: Kail Ellis. Review of Little, Douglas. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945.* H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9025