

James Reston, Jr, *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2008

If you grew up in the 1970s, it was impossible not to be acutely aware of the Middle East as a flashpoint in the Cold War, a region fraught with danger, beset by conflict between Israel and the surrounding Arab states, home to radical groups that hijacked airplanes and in 1972 disrupted the Olympics. Long and difficult negotiations finally led to peace between Egypt and Israel in 1977, before darkness returned after the Shah of Iran was overthrown and replaced by a revolutionary group led by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.

The kaleidoscope of war, peace, terrorism and revolution was a vivid and unsettling aspect of the 1970s, but what is both startling and depressing about the Middle East is that the same statement with different details could be made about the region for every single decade of the 20th century, and for the first decade of the 21st. It is not true that the Middle East has seen more war or instability than any other region in the world over the past century; far from it. Southeast Asia, Korea, China, Europe through 1945 saw far more devastation and death from war, as have large swaths of sub-Saharan Africa in the past decades. But the Middle East does have a singular ability to draw attention, create global shock waves and upset international politics. While the discovery of oil in the region early in the 20th century was certainly a factor, oil has not been the sole source of conflict or the primary reason for many of the crises. There is no one reason for the peculiar capacity of the Middle East to generate shock waves. Take history, a dollop of religion and ideology, mix in a bit of geography, add oil and serve over political sclerosis and corruption with some bad luck on the side, and you get a tumultuous corner of the world where 'after a century of Western assertiveness, peace remains elusive and sectarian passions are virulent.'

The quotation comes from *'Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East,'* co-authored by Karl Meyer (longtime editor of the *World Policy Journal*) and Shareen Blair Brysac (a documentary producer and author of several previous books, one with her husband, Meyer). Acutely aware of the central role of the Middle East in the various passion plays of the past century, the two have written a book that tells the story of British and American entanglement in the Middle East through the lives of 12 people who shaped—or tried to shape—the arc of Middle Eastern history. Beginning with Lord Cromer, whom they dub “the proconsul” because of his long tenure as de facto ruler of Egypt on behalf of the British empire at the end of the 19th century, continuing with the likes of T. E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell and Kermit “Kim Roosevelt,” they conclude with Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. deputy secretary of defense from 2001 till 2004, one of the primary architects of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, cleverly and poignantly given the sobriquet “the man who knew too much” by Meyer and Brysac.

It is to their credit that the book places Wolfowitz at the end of a continuum that began more than a century ago. While his belief that America was uniquely placed to remake Iraqi society by overthrowing Saddam Hussein appeared at the time to be a radical departure from the status quo approach to the region, the belief that Western ingenuity and initiative could reshape the Middle East and make it better has been an endemic problem for generations. Meyer and Brysac do not preach, and they focus primarily on the stories rather than on the lessons. But they make clear at both the onset and the conclusion that the continual shortcomings of the various kingmakers

were not the product of 'malice or ignorance, but ... an excess of ambition. These proconsuls and paladins undertook—to state it simply—to do the impossible for the ungrateful.'

The inclusion of Wolfowitz is the perfect denouement to the inglorious history of king-making. It is also likely to attract the lion's share of attention, especially relative to less familiar and frankly less controversial figures such as Lord and Lady Lugard, who ruled Nigeria on behalf of Queen Victoria at the end of the 19th century. Without actually saying "I told you so," Meyer and Brysac portray Wolfowitz as the latest in a series of misguided, overweening kingmakers whose reach exceeded their grasp. If the present blowback from the Iraq debacle is more acute right now than the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1954 or the placement of King Faisal on the throne of Iraq by the British in 1921, that is only because the sting and harm of those earlier episodes have faded in the fullness of time. One day, Iraq will be part of an inglorious past; it may even become a quaint tale of arrogance and ignorance, but for now we are left with the raw wounds and the as-yet-to-heal scars.

The great virtue of "Kingmakers" is to place the recent Iraq invasion in its historical context. The result is to demonstrate that a central aspect of the modern history of the Middle East consists of visionary Westerners failing to achieve their visions in the region. It is easy enough to vilify these actors for their stupidity and cupidity, but the reality was often complicated. Many of the kingmakers were highly educated, fluent in Arabic or Persian, and had spent years living in the region. They were hardly ignorant or uninformed. Yet, true-blue British scions such as Sir Mark Sykes, who was the architect of a secret Anglo-French agreement during World War I that carved up the region between France and Britain, or John Bagot Glubb, who as "Glubb Pasha" created and led the Jordanian army for more than three decades until he was dismissed by King Hussein in 1956, carried with them a cultural lens that distorted as much as it revealed. That is a human failing, and perhaps inevitable; we are all products of a particular culture with its own peculiar frames of references, moral codes and rights and wrongs. But the kingmakers, both British and American, also had power, and more of it than the Arabs and Persians that they directly or indirectly manipulated and ruled. That made their cultural frames less benign, and allowed them to inflict substantial harm, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes purposefully.

That they believed in a larger cause doesn't excuse the consequences. Men like Lawrence of Arabia, Sykes and of course Wolfowitz may have believed that their actions would serve the interests of progress, stability and the greater good of the region, but they also believed that their societies were more advanced and positioned to teach the peoples of the Middle East a lesson in civilization and democracy. They viewed local rulers, whether Faisal in Iraq in the 1920s, Abdullah in Jordan in the 1920s through the 1940s, the Shah of Iran from the 1940s through the 1970s or Iraqi exiles like Ahmad Chalabi, as well intentioned but underdeveloped wards, teenagers in need of guidance and occasional sternness. That the Arabs and Persians had developed their own cultures and civilizations over the course of 2,000 years, had thrived when the West was mired in chaos and darkness, and had their own sense of the past and the future was largely discounted by these kingmakers and ignored except as interesting academic factoids of days long gone.

One of the wiser comments from the various players in these stories comes from Ja'far al-Askari, an Iraqi notable who led one faction during the tumultuous 1920s, who remarked to Gertrude

Bell that the Iraq independence was not something that the British could grant or impose. 'My lady, complete independence is never given; it is always taken.'

For Americans especially, heirs to a revolutionary tradition that established the independence of the United States from Great Britain in the late 18th century, that should have been obvious. But somehow, the American past was never used as a guide to American policy in other regions. Americans cherish their streak of stubbornness and independence, and tend to reject foreign ideas and influences. Americans would never accept with open arms a foreign power invading under the guise of liberators, yet many fully expected that the Iraqis of 2003 would do just that. More than a century of history to the contrary was overlooked and discounted.

Meyer and Brysac are perhaps too modest in their approach; they are content to tell the stories, framed by the cautionary lesson they want to impart, but without directly speaking to the issues of today. They are traditional historians, wary of drawing too many simple present-tense conclusions from a past that is complicated and messier. But if they pull their punches, they still manage to offer a panoply of stories with contemporary relevance and resonance. It would be wonderful if future generations of American leaders took some of this history to heart. But while we have been reconsidering the wisdom of U.S. actions in Iraq, it's not clear that we have begun to examine the limitations of power and the dangers of unrealistic visions of how the world could be. Balancing idealism with realism has never been easy, but it would be refreshing not to continue tilting with windmills in the deserts of the Middle East.