

Philip S. Golub

Book Review

The Wasteland of Empire

Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire, Western Footprints,
and America's Path in the Middle East*

reviewed by
Philip S. Golub

Shortly before his death, Edward Said warned against the cancerous spread of essentialist discourses about Islam and the Arab world in America: "I wish I could say," he wrote, "that general understanding of the Middle East, Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn't." To the contrary, since 9/11 there has been "a hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, and the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters." Fueled by right wing ideologues intent on manufacturing otherness and justifying American imperial expansion, we have witnessed a "massive and calculatedly aggressive attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights . . ." In its most primitive and vengeful form, this ideological campaign has framed Islam as a "very wicked and evil religion" (Franklin Graham), and vilified Mohamed as a "terrorist" (Jerry Falwell). Subtler but no less pernicious academic variants have painted a monochrome picture of immobile societies stuck in pre-modernity, pathologically absorbed in lost golden ages, nourishing ancient grievances against a world that has irretrievably left them behind, and desperately in need of a (Protestant) reformation (Bernard Lewis). American society has been saturated by endlessly repeated mind-numbing media clichés about "them" and "us," about the unquenchable hatred that Islamist radicals are said to harbor against (Western) modernity and open societies.

The highest levels of government have been corrupted by this Orientalist worldview. U.S. policy in the Middle East and the Gulf is driven, in Juan Cole's words, by "complete ignorance of Arabs and Arab culture." Indeed, pseudo-scientific narratives about Arab "behavior" have become the staple of official American thinking, if one can call it that. Rafael Patai's *The Arab Mind*,² a compendium of racist stereotypes and

Eurocentric generalizations (there is “an all-encompassing preoccupation with sex in the Arab mind,” the Arabs only understand force, etc.), has become the bible of the Bush administration’s leading neoconservative lights and “the most popular and widely read book on the Arabs in the U.S. military.”³ Said noted over twenty years ago that Patai’s 1973 book, reissued in 2001, “eradicates the plurality of differences among the Arabs (whoever they may be in fact) in the interest of one difference, that one setting Arabs off from everyone else.”⁴ That difference not only transforms Arabs into passive object of the Western “scientific” gaze but effectively removes them from the sphere of “civilization,” hence authorizing practices that violate fundamental humanitarian standards. Torture and sexual humiliation have thus become the symbols of America’s early 21st century imperial experiment in the Middle East.⁵ Such are the rhetorical devices and the bleak practices of Empire.

Thankfully, there are dissident voices in this intellectual and moral wasteland. In a carefully crafted but anguished essay on European and American imperial politics that deserves wide circulation, Rashid Khalidi argues that the United States is “wittingly or unwittingly stepping into the boots of earlier imperial powers.” That “enthusiastic ignorance” and imperial hubris have combined in a fateful and futile attempt to reconfigure the Arab Middle East in America’s image. Whatever America’s imperial managers may think about themselves or say about their actions, throughout the Middle East, and indeed the Third World as a whole, the Bush administration’s armed intrusion into Arab affairs is understood as “an attempt to reverse the course of history and reimpose Western control in a part of the world that has been struggling for two centuries to resist it.” How could they see things otherwise? The discourses are the same: like the European colonial powers which subjugated the peoples of South America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia in the name of their supposed *mission civilisatrice*, America’s contemporary neo-imperial ideologues make the claim that U.S. tanks and bayonets are bringing reform, progress and enlightenment to the Arab world. Like the European founders of modern “scientific” racism who contended that “Mohammedanism is the greatest of all hindrances to every progress of civilization,”⁶ and argued that logic is something that the “Oriental is altogether disposed to ignore,”⁷ the U.S. has framed the war in Iraq, and the wider attempt to reconfigure the region through force, as part of a wider struggle between civilization and barbarism, darkness and light. In the early days after 9/11, George Bush actually talked about a “crusade.”

If the discourses are analogous, so are the practices. In 1841, Alexis de Tocqueville chided faint-hearted French democrats for failing to accept that “any people wishing to make war with the Arabs will be forced . . . to burn crops, empty silos and seize unarmed men, women and children.”⁸ Today, our Tocquevillian neoconservatives recommend that “maximum force” be used “to demonstrate that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity,”⁹ or “to demonstrate our seriousness.”¹⁰ Having imprudently refused to greet their U.S. “liberators” with jasmine, rosewater and incense, the Iraqis should, in the words of an official of the former Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, be “scared into submission.”¹¹ The parallel between Algeria and Iraq is not the product of this author’s imagination: the Pentagon held a private screening of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* for senior personnel on August 27, 2003. The film, the most powerful critical cinematic treatment of French colonialism, shows how French counterinsurgency operations succeeded in breaking the backbone of National Liberation Front resistance in Algiers thanks to torture. France won all the battles but nonetheless lost the war.

As senior U.S. commanders recognize, the U.S. is also losing its war in Iraq.¹² Although there is still room for debate concerning the hierarchy of motivations leading to the war, it is plainly apparent that the Bush administration invaded Iraq with the intent of setting up a protectorate in the heart of the Gulf. It never intended to establish direct rule like the British in India, but a system of indirect rule, relying on local allies and buttressed by U.S. military power, akin to Britain in Egypt after 1922. This, as Khalidi reminds us, is also a page from Europe’s colonial book. The European colonial powers set up differentiated forms of control in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf:

These ranged from the direct rule of the French in Algeria, which was virtually annexed to France and whose indigenous population lost its rights and lands in favor of newly arrived European colonists, to various forms of indirect rule preferred by the British, and also adapted by the French in Tunis. In these cases of indirect rule, local potentates were maintained in place . . . but their power was more apparent than real. In every case, control was firmly in the hands of European “advisors,” backed by European and mercenary troops, who ensured that every important aspect of governance developed in

accord with the desires of the dominant western power. (p. 18)

The U.S. has benevolently granted Iraq limited sovereignty. It has transferred minor authority to an American-appointed government headed by a former Iraqi intelligence officer with longstanding CIA ties. Washington grandly claims that this shows that it has neither territorial ambitions or unstated imperial aims. But the U.S. will run the country as surely as Britain ran Egypt. When needed, it will no doubt resort, like the Europeans before it, to exceptional brutality. In Libya, in the early 20th century, the Italians destroyed “the country’s social structure” and expelled “the population from the fertile coastal regions in favor of Italian colonists.” In Morocco and Syria, the French mastered repeated revolts through “massive forces and the extensive use of air power.” In Iraq, Britain’s General Frederick Stanley Maude famously marched into Baghdad in 1917 proclaiming, “Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.” Three years later, Great Britain was suppressing a mass uprising by bombing villages and using poison gas.¹³ The Mandate was saved.

The U.S., in short, is walking down a well-trodden path, lined with the victims of European colonial rule. If history is any guide, America’s imperial experiment is going to fail, possibly disastrously. On this, Khalidi writes

However much may have changed in the world . . . and however powerful the U.S. may be, any deep reading of the history of the Middle East would show that it is impossible to erect a Western system of domination there in the 21st century that will not face resistance by its subjects. It is impossible to march into the Middle East proclaiming good intentions and to ignore the fact that the locals have a longer sense of history than most Americans, and will recall vividly that over the past two centuries they have been reassured several times by their conquerors that they had the best of intentions. (p. 167)

Indeed, the war and occupation of Iraq have stimulated resistance and widened the divide between “Islam” and the “West.” While most Americans still cling to the dominant national narrative of a uniquely successful democratic and anti-colonial trajectory, under George W. Bush

the U.S. is becoming what Third World people on the receiving end long suspected, a classic colonial empire. The informal empire established after the Second World War is fast giving way to a quasi-territorial empire upheld by an archipelago of military bases and foreign legions stationed in the heart of semi-sovereign Third World states. But America should beware: neither France nor Britain were able, even at their height, “to dominate most parts of this region directly for long without paying an exorbitant price.” As the imperial experiment unravels under our eyes, the question is what price Americans are really willing to pay for empire.

Notes

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 2003, pp. xviii and xix.

² Rafael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (Long Island City: Hatherleigh Press, 2002, rev. ed.)

³ See Brian Whitaker, *The Arab Mind*, London *Guardian*, May 27, 2004. Patai’s pamphlet “is used as a textbook for officers at the JFK special warfare school in Fort Bragg. . . . The State Department, too, used to take an interest in the book, although it seemingly no longer does. At one stage, the training department gave free copies to officials when they were posted to U.S. embassies in the Middle East.” First published in 1973, the book was republished in 2001 with a foreword by Norvell B. DeAtkine, Director of Middle East Studies at the JFK Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg who writes: “At the institution where I teach military affairs, *The Arab Mind* forms the basis of my cultural instruction.”

⁴ Said, op. cit. p. 309.

⁵ As J. M. Coetzee’s exploration of the subject in *The Coming of the Barbarians* so brilliantly showed, torture is the submerged truth of colonial conquest and empire.

⁶ See, Houston S. Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the 19th Century*, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1910.

⁷ Lord Cromer, quoted by Said, op. cit. p.36.

⁸ A. de Tocqueville. "Travail sur l'Algérie (octobre 1841)" in *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1991, tome 1, p. 704 et 753.

⁹ Stephen Peter Rosen, *The Future of War and the American Military*, *Harvard Review*, May-June 2002, Volume 104, No. 5.

¹⁰ Charles Krauthammer, "This is Hardly Vietnam," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2004; Page A 21. After Falluja, William Kristol likewise wrote: "We could have sent many tanks, along with air support, to disperse the mob, kill those who didn't disperse, intimidate onlookers, and recover the bodies of the dead Americans. And we could immediately have put a price on the head of the killers and those who desecrated the bodies." See "After Falluja," *Weekly Standard*, April 12/19 issue.

¹¹ Quoted by Seymour Hersh, quoted in H.D.S. Greenway, "Is America facing an Iraqi Intifadah?" *Boston Globe*, 9 April 2004.

¹² See Philip S. Golub, "End of the Consensus," *Le monde diplomatique*, English edition, June 2004.

¹³ Winston Churchill, then secretary for war and air, suggested that "Mesopotamia could be cheaply policed by aircraft armed with gas bombs, supported by as few as 4,000 British and 10,000 Indian troops."

Philip S. Golub is an American author and lecturer living in Paris. He teaches *International Relations* at *Université Paris 8* and is a contributing editor of *Le monde diplomatique*.