

Orientalism

*The United States
and the Middle East
since 1945*

DOUGLAS LITTLE

Third Edition

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CONTENTS

	Preface to the Third Edition.
	What Went Wrong?: Wake Me When September Ends ix
	Acknowledgments xiii
	Abbreviations xvii
INTRODUCTION	Gideon's Band in the Holy Land: We're Not in Kansas Anymore 1
CHAPTER ONE	Orientalism, American Style: The Middle East in the Mind of America 9
CHAPTER TWO	Opening the Door: Business, Diplomacy, and America's Stake in Middle East Oil 43
CHAPTER THREE	The Making of a Special Relationship: America and Israel 77

CHAPTER FOUR	A Tale of Four Doctrines: U.S. National Security, the Soviet Threat, and the Middle East 117
CHAPTER FIVE	Sympathy for the Devil?: America, Nasser, and Arab Revolutionary Nationalism 157
CHAPTER SIX	Modernizing the Middle East: From Reform to Revolution in Iraq, Libya, and Iran 193
CHAPTER SEVEN	Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome: Waging Limited War from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf 229
CHAPTER EIGHT	Opportunities Lost and Found: The United States and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process 267
CHAPTER NINE	Not Your Father's Persian Gulf War: The Bush Doctrine, Iraq, and Radical Islam 307
	Notes 343
	Bibliography 393
	Index 421

If you want a war, nourish a doctrine. Doctrines are the most fearful tyrants to which men ever are subject, because doctrines get inside of a man's own reason and betray him against himself. Civilized men have done their fiercest fighting for doctrines.

—William Graham Sumner, *War* (1903)

The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: It contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. . . .

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.

—Jimmy Carter lays out the Carter Doctrine, 1980

4

A Tale of Four Doctrines

*U.S. National Security, the Soviet Threat,
and the Middle East*

Although the promise of Israel as America's strategic asset was never quite fulfilled, Washington's pursuit of such a relationship was part of a more ambitious quest to promote regional defense and prevent communist inroads in the Middle East after 1945. Wedded to an evolving doctrine of national security that defined the Soviet Union as a mortal threat to the United States and that dictated global vigilance against Russian-backed communist subversion, U.S. policymakers from Harry Truman to Jimmy Carter waged a Cold War against the Kremlin from the sun-drenched shores of the Eastern Mediterranean to the snow-capped mountains of Afghanistan. Some historians point to the Red Army's belated departure from Iran in early 1946 and to its sudden arrival in Kabul in late 1979 as proof of Moscow's unwavering drive to dominate the Middle East. Other scholars, however, argue that U.S. leaders

overreacted to Russian diplomatic pressure during the late 1940s and overestimated Soviet responsibility for the anti-Western upheavals that rocked the Muslim world during the decades that followed. While definitive answers regarding Soviet motivation must await further revelations from the Russian archives, a careful examination of the U.S. documentary record confirms that Uncle Sam's reliance on doctrinal prescriptions to cure diplomatic insecurity has deep roots in the American past.

A fragile republic in a world dominated by imperial powers such as Great Britain, the newly independent United States relied more on geographic remoteness than military preparedness to defend itself well into the nineteenth century. But in December 1823 the specter of European aggrandizement from the Pacific Northwest to Cape Horn prompted President James Monroe to stake America's claim to a sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere in a doctrine that bears his name. Proclaiming that the independent nations of the New World were "henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers," Monroe declared that the United States would regard "any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and security."¹ The most formidable challenge to the Monroe Doctrine came from the British, whose designs on Texas, Cuba, and Venezuela triggered periodic clashes with the United States through the 1890s. By the turn of the century, however, Britain had lost interest in the Western Hemisphere and turned its attention to matters both more pressing and more profitable, such as the acquisition of oil concessions in the Persian Gulf and imperial lines of communication in the Eastern Mediterranean.²

Among the first Americans to appreciate the strategic importance of the Middle East for the British was Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, a naval historian whose books on sea power had become Gilded Age best-sellers. Indeed, Mahan inadvertently provided the region with its modern name. "The middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day need its Malta as well as its Gibraltar," Mahan prophesied in a 1902 essay detailing Britain's ceaseless efforts to keep Russia out of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. He expected the British to expand their naval base in Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea and to establish new outposts in the tiny sheikhdoms that rimmed the Persian Gulf. Whitehall's most important regional stronghold, however, was certain to be the isthmus of Suez, bisected by a British-controlled canal whose commercial and military significance was, in Mahan's eyes, unsurpassed in the entire Eastern Hemisphere.³ Although Whitehall managed to fulfill most of Mahan's prophecy during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Second World War badly damaged the British Empire and fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Middle East.

Having served as the cornerstone for U.S. diplomacy in the Western Hemisphere for more than 100 years, the Monroe Doctrine seems subconsciously to have become an intellectual lodestone for U.S. policymakers seeking to stabilize the Middle East after 1945. Hoping to avoid a vacuum in a region whose strategic importance was fast becoming unparalleled, the White House agreed in March 1947 to assume Britain's long-standing commitments in Greece and Turkey under the auspices of the Truman Doctrine, with the understanding that Whitehall would retain primary responsibility for the defense of the Arab world. Following a decade of ugly Anglo-Arab confrontations that undermined regional security and invited Soviet meddling, in 1957 U.S. policymakers unveiled the Eisenhower Doctrine, which made Washington the senior member of the Anglo-American partnership in the Middle East. When Britain's deepening financial woes eventually forced Whitehall to liquidate its last imperial outposts in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf in the late 1960s, U.S. officials edged toward what came to be known as the Nixon Doctrine, which envisioned regional proxies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia serving as junior partners against the Kremlin. When events in Iran and Afghanistan showed that America's proxies simply could not do the job, Jimmy Carter promulgated his own doctrine and, with a bow to Harry Truman, informed the world in January 1980 that the United States had vital security interests in the Middle East for which it was willing to fight, whether it had dependable partners or not.

To the Truman Doctrine and Beyond, 1941–1952

When Harry Truman took the oath of office thirty-five years earlier, he hoped that the British would remain reliable partners in the Middle East. Throughout the early 1940s the Roosevelt administration had assumed that postwar Britain would continue to play its historic role as the chief guarantor of security in the region. "The Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Libya and the Mediterranean," FDR had cabled Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a March 1942 recap of the Anglo-American plan of battle against the Axis, "would fall directly under British responsibility."⁴ But Hitler made Churchill's task as difficult as possible, and U.S. officials soon questioned whether Whitehall was capable of fulfilling its regional duties. "Great Britain," Patrick Hurley, one of FDR's roving ambassadors, remarked after visiting Egypt in May 1943, "no longer possesses within herself the essentials of power needed to maintain her traditional role as the dominant influence in the Middle East area."⁵

Hurley's diagnosis was confirmed by the steady erosion of Whitehall's position and by subtle indications that the Kremlin was quietly preparing to fill the resulting vacuum. As early as the spring of 1944 U.S. observers were re-

porting that "Soviet policy in the Arab world appears to be aimed at the reduction of British influence in that area and the acquisition of the balance of power."⁶ By V-E Day, State Department experts had concluded that if Britain could no longer prevent the Soviet Union from fishing in troubled waters, the United States might have to assume responsibility for "fostering the economic advancement of the Middle East peoples" and "facilitating freedom from external interference and exploitation."⁷

That the Kremlin sought to expand its influence along Russia's southern flank after the Second World War is beyond doubt. After all, Josef Stalin, the brutal and ruthless dictator who had held sway in Moscow for nearly two decades, had sent thousands of Soviet troops into northern Iran in 1941 and had recently stepped up diplomatic pressure on Turkey, which had long refused to allow the Red Navy to pass through the Dardanelles, the narrow straits that connected the Black Sea with the Mediterranean. Although the nature of Stalin's ultimate objectives remained far from clear, by the autumn of 1945 U.S. policymakers tended to expect the worst. "The British publicly admit that they are no longer able to keep the Middle East in order without our help," State Department officials warned the White House in mid-October, and "Soviet Russia is showing marked interest in the area." Unless the United States responded "firmly and adequately," Foggy Bottom's experts concluded, "a situation might well develop in the Near East which would result in another World War."⁸

Loy Henderson, one of the State Department's leading authorities on Soviet foreign policy, outlined the implications of the impending crisis in the Middle East in a graphic memorandum that found its way to the Oval Office early in the new year. "The national objectives of two Great Powers, namely the Soviet Union and Great Britain," he pointed out on 28 December 1945, "collide head-on in this region." Whitehall was still "endeavoring to use the Near Eastern area as a great dam . . . to hold back the flow of Russia towards the south." The Kremlin, on the other hand, "seems to be determined to break down the structure which Great Britain has maintained so that Russian power and influence can sweep unimpeded across Turkey and through the Dardanelles into the Mediterranean, across Iran and through the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean." Henderson believed that Washington could ill afford to allow Moscow to succeed. "During the last five years, two great barriers to Russian expansion have disappeared, namely Germany in the West and Japan in the East," he concluded. "Judging from recent events in the Near East, Russia now appears to be concentrating upon the removal of a third barrier in the South."⁹ For Truman's administration as for Monroe's 120 years earlier, an autocratic Old World power seemed to pose a threat to vital U.S. security interests in a

region whose people were in the process of winning their independence from imperial rule.

It did not take long for a consensus to emerge in Washington that the United States must establish a national security state capable of preventing Soviet encroachments in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The Truman administration's most pressing concern was the situation in Iran, where despite the Kremlin's assurances to the contrary, the Red Army was tightening its grip on Azerbaijan province, 200 miles northwest of Tehran. When Stalin failed to fulfill his wartime pledge to withdraw his troops from Iran no later than 2 March, the State Department fired off a blistering protest condemning the prolonged Soviet occupation as a "gross violation" of Iranian sovereignty and territorial integrity that held "many dangerous implications."¹⁰

Washington's point man during the Iranian crisis was James F. Byrnes, a feisty South Carolina Democrat who had headed Roosevelt's Office of War Mobilization until Truman named him secretary of state shortly after V-E Day. Once it was clear that the Soviets had ignored the U.S. protest and were reinforcing the Red Army and encouraging a left-wing separatist movement in Azerbaijan, Byrnes beat one fist into his other hand on 6 March and growled, "Now we'll give it to them with both barrels."¹¹ Barrel number one was a U.S.-sponsored United Nations resolution branding the Kremlin's presence in northern Iran a threat to world peace. Barrel number two consisted of vague hints that the United States stood ready to use armed force to expel the Soviets from Azerbaijan, a scenario that generated a flurry of headlines forecasting a third world war. In the event, Byrnes's double-barreled shotgun proved less effective than the single-minded diplomatic horse-trading of Iranian prime minister Ahmad Qavam, who flew to Moscow in mid-March and persuaded the Kremlin to withdraw all of its troops from Azerbaijan in return for assurances of Soviet access to Iranian oil reserves.

Although many scholars have recently interpreted the Soviet withdrawal on 6 May 1946 as evidence that the Kremlin's objectives were relatively limited, Truman and his senior advisers regarded the Red Army's prolonged presence in northern Iran as a probing action that presaged a more general Russian offensive in the Middle East. As the Soviet-American confrontation in Iran had moved toward its climax, George Kennan, the insightful U.S. chargé d'affaires in Moscow, had warned Washington on 22 February in his famous "Long Telegram" that the "Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs" and its "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" were likely to spell serious trouble for other neighboring states such as Turkey. Six months later Stalin unveiled a proposal calling for joint Soviet and Turkish control of the Dardanelles. Fearing that Moscow was ready to resort to armed force if the

straits remained closed, the Turks sought help from Britain and the United States.¹²

The traditional and instinctive American sense of insecurity helped ensure that U.S. policymakers adopted a worst-case scenario in dealing with the Turkish request. During an Oval Office meeting on 15 August, Truman and his top advisers concluded that “the primary objective of the Soviet Union is to obtain control of Turkey.” Dismissing the possibility that the Kremlin would limit itself to securing safe and unimpeded passage through the Dardanelles, U.S. officials worried that a Russian triumph in Turkey would make it “extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prevent the Soviet Union from obtaining control over Greece and over the whole Near and Middle East.”¹³ U.K. policymakers were as determined as their U.S. counterparts to prevent Soviet inroads into Turkey and elsewhere in the region. Coordinating their actions, Whitehall and the White House privately advised the Turks to reject the Kremlin’s unilateral power play and publicly suggested that the fate of the Turkish straits be resolved by an international conference to be attended by all maritime powers, including Britain and the United States.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the apocalyptic scenarios popular on both sides of the Atlantic, the Turco-Soviet crisis ended with a whimper rather than a bang. Although Moscow continued to harass Ankara diplomatically, Stalin never tried to force his way through the Dardanelles, nor did the Red Army occupy eastern Turkey. Moreover, Stalin expressed no interest in attending an international conference on the Turkish straits, where he was certain to be outvoted by the United States and Great Britain. As the year drew to a close, a combination of U.S. diplomatic and economic support and British military aid seemed to have assuaged Turkish anxieties. Yet the Truman administration was well aware that its policy in Turkey, and in the region as a whole, hinged on help from Washington’s faltering partner in London. “If a case should arise where Britain is not in a position to furnish the necessary arms and military equipment” to the Turks or their neighbors, the State Department observed on 21 October 1946, the United States would have to “consider furnishing certain supplies direct.”¹⁵

Just such a case arose a few months later across the Aegean Sea in Athens, where a deepening political crisis forced Washington to assume most of London’s responsibilities under the auspices of the Truman Doctrine. By the autumn of 1946 Greece was embroiled in a bloody civil war that pitted communist-led guerrillas against a right-wing government armed and financed by Britain. In early 1947 U.K. officials informed the Truman administration that acute economic problems required a drastic reduction in London’s role in Athens and urged Washington “to afford financial assistance to Greece on scale sufficient to meet her minimum needs, both civil and military.”¹⁶ Having monitored the

deteriorating situation for more than two years, U.S. policymakers privately acknowledged that most of Greece's woes were homegrown, not imported from Moscow. But American officials were also well aware that a left-wing victory in the Greek civil war would be widely interpreted as a triumph for the Kremlin. "Soviets feel that Greece is a ripe plum ready to fall into their hands in a few weeks," Mark Ethridge, the U.S. representative on the U.N. observation team stationed in Athens, cabled Foggy Bottom on 17 February.¹⁷ Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson could not have agreed more. "The capitulation of Greece to Soviet domination through lack of adequate support from the U.S. and Great Britain," he observed grimly on 21 February, "might eventually result in the loss of the whole Near and Middle East and northern Africa."¹⁸

Acheson's boss was equally pessimistic. Whitehall's withdrawal from Greece, Secretary of State George Marshall sighed on 24 February, was "tantamount to British abdication from the Middle East with obvious implications as to their successor."¹⁹ Three days later Harry Truman invited congressional leaders to the White House, where Marshall and Acheson briefed them on the bleak situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. "Soviet pressure on the Straits, on Iran, and on northern Greece had brought the Balkans to the point where a highly possible Soviet breakthrough might open three continents to Soviet penetration," Acheson told the stunned lawmakers. "Like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east."²⁰ With so much at stake, the president informed his visitors that he had "decided to extend aid to Greece and Turkey" and expressed his hope that "Congress would provide the means to make this aid timely and sufficient."²¹

On the afternoon of 12 March Truman delivered a momentous eighteen-minute address to a joint session of Congress declaring that U.S. national security required the containment of the Soviet Union. Promulgating what soon became known as the Truman Doctrine, the president vowed that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" and won swift congressional approval for a \$400 million military and economic aid package to shore up anticommunist forces in Greece and Turkey.²² The Truman administration broadened the agenda in early June by proposing a multi-billion-dollar European Recovery Program that eventually became the Marshall Plan. On 25 July Congress passed the National Security Act, landmark legislation that established both the NSC and the CIA and that laid the groundwork for the creation of a single unified Department of Defense. By the autumn of 1947 the Truman Doctrine and other key components of America's Cold War national security state were in place.²³

In mid-October Truman's top advisers invited British policymakers to the Pentagon for a series of skull sessions to determine how best to utilize these

new components in the Middle East. As the Pentagon talks progressed, a rough consensus began to emerge. "Greece and Turkey are, politically and strategically, the North Western bastions of the Middle East," Foreign Office briefing papers pointed out, and "primary responsibility for aid to those countries now lies with the United States." For their part U.K. strategic planners would be free "to concentrate on those Middle East points which are our primary interest," such as the Persian Gulf oil fields and the Suez Canal.²⁴ This sort of arrangement was quite attractive to the Americans, who were preoccupied with combating the Kremlin in Europe and Asia. Noting that vital Western interests in the Middle East made it "essential that Soviet expansion in that area be contained," State Department officials hoped to cast "Britain in the role of a benevolent and welcome senior partner," with "primary responsibility for military security" throughout the Muslim world.²⁵ After hammering out position papers on everything from Afghanistan to Yemen, the two delegations affirmed their mutual desire "to follow parallel policies" and "to cooperate with and support the other in the area."²⁶

The informal Anglo-American partnership in the Middle East foreshadowed by the Truman Doctrine and fleshed out during the Pentagon talks would be sorely tested in the months ahead. Assuming the role of the aggrieved senior partner, Whitehall complained throughout 1948 and well into 1949 that U.S. support for the creation of Israel was undermining Western security in the region by tempting the Arabs to seek Soviet help. Playing the part of the frustrated junior partner, Foggy Bottom retorted that British inflexibility in dealing with Muslim aspirations for self-government was equally important in driving pro-Western leaders in Egypt and Iran toward the Kremlin. When U.S. and U.K. experts gathered in Washington in November 1949, Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee wondered whether it might be time for a thorough reevaluation of the explosive situation in the Middle East. "Should the United States Government choose to assume greater responsibility in the area," Sir Michael Wright, McGhee's British counterpart, replied, "such a decision would be welcomed by the United Kingdom as being to the common advantage."²⁷

McGhee's call for a review of America's approach to the Middle East was just one part of a much broader reassessment of U.S. national security policy that was taking shape as the year drew to a close. Distressed by a series of unexpected setbacks during the last half of 1949—the Kremlin's acquisition of nuclear weapons in August, the U.S. economy's sudden slide into a sharp recession in September, and the triumph of communism in China in October—many in Washington feared that the tide in the Cold War was turning decisively against the United States. Among those most troubled was Harry Truman, who on 31 January 1950 instructed the Departments of State and

Defense “to undertake a reexamination of our objectives in peace and war and of the effect of these objectives on our strategic plans.”²⁸

After ten weeks of nonstop brainstorming, on 7 April the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom sent President Truman NSC-68, an eye-opening sixty-six-page report that recommended a quadrupling of U.S. defense spending in order to globalize the policy of containment first outlined in the Truman Doctrine. Designed as a strategic game plan for winning the Cold War, NSC-68 called for rapid development of thermonuclear weapons, a psychological offensive against communism both at home and abroad, and the establishment of anti-Soviet regional defense groupings modeled on the recently created North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although they mentioned Iran, Turkey, and Greece only in passing, the drafters of NSC-68 emphasized that “Soviet efforts are now directed toward the domination of the Eurasian land mass” and warned that the Kremlin might be preparing “to drive toward the oil-bearing areas of the Near and Middle East.”²⁹

How to strengthen the strategically positioned and economically important Arab states without fueling a Middle East arms race and jeopardizing Israeli security was the principal dilemma U.S. officials confronted during the spring of 1950 as they reviewed American policy toward the region. In NSC-65, a top secret study of security requirements in the Middle East completed just ten days before NSC-68, White House advisers welcomed Whitehall’s plans to provide arms to Egypt as part of an “Anglo-Egyptian military partnership to assist the defense of the Near East in case of Soviet aggression.” But to prevent the emergence of a regional arms imbalance that might tempt the Arabs to attack Israel, the drafters of NSC-65 recommended that Washington work closely with London to regulate tightly the influx of military hardware into the area.³⁰ Truman, who reviewed NSC-65 at a cabinet meeting on 14 April, “was much interested in this idea.”³¹ Broadening the scope of the proposal to include both British war matériel earmarked for the Arabs and French arms destined for Israel, U.S. diplomats unveiled a multilateral scheme in early May designed to minimize the danger of a regional conflagration. On 25 May 1950 Britain, France, and the United States signed the Tripartite Declaration, under which all three powers pledged to uphold the principles of arms control and territorial integrity in the Middle East.³²

The eruption of the Korean War one month later galvanized support on Capitol Hill for the expensive national security programs laid out in NSC-68 and sparked renewed concern at the White House about potential Soviet aggression from the Persian Gulf to the Eastern Mediterranean. Having just witnessed the Kremlin’s clients launch a surprise attack on South Korea, one of the most pro-American regimes in Asia, the Truman administration suspected that something more substantive than the Tripartite Declaration would

be required to ensure peace and security in the Middle East, where anti-Western sentiment was spreading. By late October U.K. and U.S. policymakers were discussing an anti-Soviet regional defense initiative that would eventually come to be known as the Middle East Command (MEC). Pointing out that "whoever controls the Middle East controls access to three continents," Sir Oliver Franks, the British ambassador, and Field Marshall William J. Slim, chief of the Imperial General Staff, sought U.S. help in bringing Egypt aboard as a junior partner in a three-way alliance that would create an unbreachable barrier to Soviet expansion.³³ General Omar Bradley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), expressed considerable interest in Whitehall's Egypt-centered plan for regional security. But with one eye on the escalating conflict in Korea and the other on rising tensions in Europe, General Lawton Collins, the army chief of staff, reiterated that from the Pentagon's point of view, "the Middle East is a British responsibility in case of a hot war."³⁴

British and U.S. officials met again in early 1951 to discuss a MEC modeled on NATO. The MEC was to be composed of an "inner ring" consisting of Egypt and other Arab states led by a British supreme commander and linked to an "outer ring" stretching along Russia's southern flank from Greece to Iran. Convinced that this U.K. initiative would serve "to build up the will of the area to resist Communism" by working "to strengthen the whole Near Eastern will to defend itself and to join with the West," the Truman administration agreed to provide modest amounts of U.S. military assistance to key Arab states under the auspices of America's new Mutual Security Program.³⁵

Despite the establishment of an Anglo-American working group in June charged with breathing life into the new regional security organization, the MEC was dead on arrival in December. The fatal blow was inflicted in mid-October by the Egyptians, who regarded the dire U.S. and U.K. concerns about the Soviet menace as a rhetorical fig leaf designed to conceal a far graver threat to Arab independence: British imperialism. Egypt's flat rejection of the MEC and its blunt demand that Whitehall evacuate the huge British military complex that straddled the Suez Canal, the NSC staff concluded two days before Christmas, was evidence of "the rapidly declining ability of the U.K. to maintain and defend Western interests in parts of the Middle East," which signaled "the decline of the U.K. as a world power" sooner rather than later. "Doubtful that . . . the U.S. or the U.K., or both together [could] maintain and defend Western interests in the area in the 19th century fashion," Truman's advisers believed that "the West must work toward . . . a new kind of relationship" with the nations of the Middle East.³⁶

The new year, however, would bring only old wine in new bottles. Hoping to soothe a sore spot with Arab leaders for whom the word "command" evoked ugly memories of British imperialism, U.S. officials rechristened the MEC in

June 1952 as the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO).³⁷ Semantics and nomenclature notwithstanding, the primary objective for MEDO, as for its predecessor, was the containment of the Soviet Union, something which rang increasingly hollow in the ears of Arabs who believed that they had more to fear from Whitehall than from the Kremlin. Later that summer top U.S. officials privately acknowledged that the security of Western interests in the Middle East would probably require not only a change in names but also an Anglo-American reversal in roles. Noting that “some parts of the area reminded me too much of the China situation for comfort,” Assistant Secretary of State Henry Byroade warned Harry Truman on 8 August that “there was a great chance . . . that we would see a general withdrawal of the British from the Middle East” before the new defense organization had come into being. “If this happened,” Byroade added, “the United States would be faced with some very fundamental decisions as to what we could do to help fill the vacuum thus created and maintain and strengthen the U.S. position in the area.” Troubled by signs of instability from the Nile Delta to the Persian Gulf, Truman “agreed with this general analysis, indicating that he thought the United States would soon face just such a set of circumstances.”³⁸

Since he had already decided not to seek reelection in November, the Missouri Democrat doubtless took comfort from the knowledge that someone else would be responsible for filling the vacuum in the Middle East. Yet for the man who had promulgated the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, there must also have been much concern. A little more than five years after moving boldly to contain the Kremlin in Greece, Turkey, and Iran, Washington seemed destined to assume London’s responsibilities for preventing Soviet expansion into the Arab world as well. By 1960 the United States would succeed Great Britain as the senior member of the Anglo-American partnership in the Middle East.

The Rise and Fall of the Eisenhower Doctrine, 1953–1960

Highly critical of the Truman administration for its oversolicitousness of British initiatives in the Middle East and its insufficient response to the Soviet threat, Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles entered office in early 1953 eager to establish America’s role as the senior Western partner in the region. They initially believed that this objective could be achieved most easily by pursuing more aggressively the regional defense program developed by their predecessors. But Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser let it be known in mid-May that the Arabs regarded MEDO as a nonstarter. Reporting that only Pakistan and Turkey seemed interested in a British-led Middle Eastern NATO, Dulles told Eisen-

hower on 1 June 1953 that “the old MEDO concept was certainly finished” and recommended “a new concept for defense” grounded in “the contribution of the indigenous peoples.”³⁹

During the next eighteen months the Eisenhower administration worked to persuade Whitehall to shift its regional security policy away from defense in depth with an Arab core toward a perimeter defense along the “Northern Tier” extending from Turkey to Pakistan. But Sir Winston Churchill, who had returned as Britain’s prime minister in late 1951, was far less interested in fortifying Turkey or Pakistan than in hanging on to British imperial outposts farther south in the Persian Gulf and the isthmus of Suez. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden likewise confirmed that Britain would never relinquish its military installations in Egypt without ironclad assurances from Nasser regarding its residual right to defend the Suez Canal.⁴⁰

By the time Churchill and Eden arrived at the White House in June 1954, however, a change in Whitehall’s strategic doctrine had persuaded them to consider a slow-motion liquidation of Britain’s position in Egypt. Earlier that spring U.K. military planners had concluded that the development of the hydrogen bomb made large strategic bases such as the one at Suez so vulnerable to devastating attack that they were, in effect, obsolete. “Our strategic needs in the Middle East,” Churchill informed the Cabinet on the eve of his departure for Washington, “had been radically changed by the development of thermonuclear weapons.”⁴¹ Yet the British, he cautioned Eisenhower on 25 June, were not simply going to cut and run. “The situation must be avoided,” he thundered, “in which people would think that the United States had driven the UK out of Egypt.”⁴² In short order Eisenhower and Churchill hammered out a face-saving arrangement whereby Britain would “withdraw all military forces” from Suez within twenty-four months provided that the Egyptians agreed to the “continued maintenance of the Base by civilian contractors” employed by British firms. This eleventh-hour compromise proved to be the key ingredient in the Suez Base agreement initialed by British and Egyptian negotiators at Cairo on 27 July 1954 and ratified four months later.⁴³

The Anglo-Egyptian settlement came as welcome news at the White House, where Eisenhower and Dulles hoped that Whitehall’s agreement to pull its troops out of Suez would help pave the way for a U.S.-backed system of regional defense. The first concrete step in this direction had come on 2 April 1954, when Turkey and Pakistan signed a vaguely worded bilateral mutual security treaty. “The Turk-Pakistani agreement provides a new basis for development of a Western-oriented defense grouping in the Middle East,” U.S. intelligence analysts concluded on 22 June, that “would be less subject to the stigma of being under direct Western control than were the Middle East Command and Middle East Defense Organization.”⁴⁴ This insight was not lost on

the drafters of NSC-5428, a top secret review of U.S. policy that Eisenhower approved one month later. According to NSC-5428 the best regional defense strategy was based on "the 'northern tier', which would include Turkey, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq."⁴⁵

Although the locally controlled perimeter defense system outlined in NSC-5428 seemed in theory an extremely effective way to shore up Western interests in the Middle East, tactical disagreements between Britain and the United States and bitter rivalries among the Turks, the Iranians, and the Arabs made implementing the northern tier scheme a diplomatic nightmare. Seeking ways to reassert their presence and rebuild their prestige in the area in the wake of the decision to relinquish their military base at Suez, the British ignored American advice to remain at arm's length and edged instead toward formal membership in the emerging regional security organization.⁴⁶ The Iraqis, with quiet encouragement from London, soft-pedaled the northern tier concept during the autumn of 1954 and gravitated toward a freestanding pan-Arab collective security pact directed against Israel, not against Russia.⁴⁷ The shah of Iran, whose realm constituted the only available geopolitical land bridge that could "close [the] Turk-Pakistani gap" stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Caspian Sea, told Washington on 15 December that he could not even think about joining a regional defense grouping unless he received a multimillion-dollar U.S. military aid package.⁴⁸

Despite pan-Arab skullduggery and royal blackmail, during 1955 the Eisenhower administration managed to sell most of America's friends in the Middle East on the northern tier concept. The U.S. proposal assumed concrete form on 24 February when Turkey and Iraq signed an anti-Soviet mutual defense agreement known as the Baghdad Pact. Pakistan followed suit seven months later after receiving promises of increased U.S. military assistance, as did Iran, which became a formal part of the new regional security scheme on 3 November in exchange for Washington's commitment to help upgrade the shah's arsenal. But there were also complications. Among the biggest was Whitehall's decision to join the Baghdad Pact on 5 April 1955, a move that top U.S. policymakers interpreted as Britain's not very subtle attempt to reaffirm its traditional role as the senior Western partner in the Middle East. The Eisenhower administration saw at least two implications in such high-profile U.K. involvement in regional security. "In the first place, the British desired to assure themselves of command responsibility in the area in the event of difficulties," Undersecretary of State Herbert Hoover Jr. told the NSC on 5 May. "Secondly, the British expected the United States to foot the bill required to place the area in some posture of defense."⁴⁹

A third and far more momentous implication was that Whitehall's membership in the Baghdad Pact effectively ruled out any participation by Egypt's

Nasser, whose abiding mistrust of the British and whose mounting suspicion of the Israelis were propelling him toward the Kremlin. Despite some increasingly strident pro-Arab rhetoric, down through Stalin's death in March 1953 Soviet policymakers, like their U.S. counterparts, had accorded the Middle East a lower priority than Central Europe or Northeast Asia. Although Nikita Khrushchev, Russia's new leader, vowed to launch an anti-Western ideological and diplomatic offensive among the newly emerging nations from North Africa to Southeast Asia, as late as the summer of 1955 the Soviets could claim few converts to communism in the Muslim world and could count not a single Middle Eastern regime in their small stable of Third World client states.⁵⁰ U.S. support for and British participation in the Baghdad Pact, however, triggered a nationalist backlash in Damascus and Cairo, where Kremlin propagandists spread word that "Western-backed defense arrangements represent a disguised form of imperialism which involves Middle East countries in provocations against the Soviet Union."⁵¹ This antiimperialist rationale served as the catalyst for the \$86 million arms-for-cotton deal that Khrushchev and Nasser concluded with the help of Czech middlemen in September 1955.

The Soviet decision to provide Egypt with military hardware suggested that the Kremlin intended to leapfrog over the northern tier into the heart of the Arab world, an action that would call into question the concept of perimeter defense on which the Baghdad Pact and America's approach to regional security in the Middle East was predicated. U.S. and U.K. policymakers hoped to counter Khrushchev's bold move by offering the Egyptians economic and technical assistance in December 1955 for the construction of the High Dam at Aswan on the Upper Nile. But this Anglo-American initiative merely convinced Nasser that he could play the East against the West, a tactic that embittered anticommunist members of the Baghdad Pact, who complained repeatedly during the first half of 1956 that Cairo's flirtation with Moscow was paying bigger dividends in Washington than was their own ideological faithfulness. Having inadvertently strained America's relations with the nations of the northern tier without arresting Egypt's drift toward the Kremlin, top U.S. officials blamed Whitehall, whose diplomatic machinations had backfired, undermining rather than bolstering regional defense. "The trouble was that the British have taken [the Baghdad Pact] over and run it as an instrument of British policy," Dulles complained on 7 April, and "pushed Egypt into the deal with the Russians."⁵²

That U.S. and British leaders no longer saw eye to eye regarding how best to promote regional security and prevent further Soviet inroads into the Middle East would become painfully obvious before the year was over. After conferring with U.K. officials, on 20 July 1956 the Eisenhower administration withdrew its offer to help Egypt finance the Aswan Dam. Six days later Nasser

retaliated by wresting control of the Suez Canal from its British and French owners. Despite Eisenhower's insistence that a negotiated settlement to the Suez crisis was feasible, Anthony Eden, who had succeeded Churchill as prime minister a year earlier, moved inexorably during the autumn on 1956 toward British armed intervention to retake the canal with French and Israeli help. Stunned by Eden's decision to bomb Cairo and airlift U.K. troops into the Suez in early November, Eisenhower employed U.S. diplomatic and financial leverage against the British, who reluctantly withdrew from Egypt once United Nations peacekeepers arrived to take their place a month later.

The implications of Washington's diplomatic coup against London were obvious to policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic. In late November Undersecretary of State Hoover wondered whether "it might be necessary for us to approach the British and say that it looks as though they are 'through' in the area, and ask if they want us to pick up their commitments."⁵³ U.K. officials wasted little time answering Hoover's loaded question. Bitter over what he regarded as monumental U.S. bad faith and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, in late November Prime Minister Eden flew to Jamaica, where he contemplated further British retrenchment in the Middle East. Meanwhile Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan, whom many in Washington regarded as Eden's heir apparent, frankly interpreted the outcome of the Suez crisis as meaning that Britain had passed the torch to the United States. "The British action was the last gasp of a declining power," Macmillan told Dulles on 12 December. "Perhaps in two hundred years the United States 'would know how we felt.'" In the meantime he urged the Americans "to think up some big, imaginative plan for the Middle East."⁵⁴

The Eisenhower administration was already contemplating several possible lines of action to fill the vacuum likely to be created by Britain's impending retreat from the Middle East. "There were three alternatives," Dulles had advised Eisenhower as early as 8 December: the United States could "join the Baghdad Pact," it could "try to create a new grouping under the [United Nations] charter," or it could "deal on a nation to nation basis 'under authority that would be granted'" by Congress. Both men dismissed the second alternative as too cumbersome and debated the merits of the other options. Eisenhower "thought we could proceed carrying 'two strings to our bow'—namely #1 and #3 proposals." Dulles reminded the president, however, that "there would be Congressional hostility to the Baghdad Pact," particularly from New York's Jacob Javits and like-minded senators on both sides of the aisle "who wanted us to give assurances to Israel." Unwilling to offer such assurances, Eisenhower concluded that "we will probably have to go along with the third choice."⁵⁵ As the year drew to a close, Eisenhower and his senior advisers hammered out the details of a new U.S. strategic doctrine that would require,

Dulles was quick to point out, “going to Congress and asking for a resolution” allowing the president to use both military force and up to \$400 million in economic aid “as a means of building our position in the Middle East.”⁵⁶

On New Year’s Day 1957 Eisenhower ushered a bipartisan group of twenty-nine congressional leaders into the Cabinet Room for an unprecedented four-hour briefing on the Middle East. While Iowa trounced Oregon State in the Rose Bowl and an Alberta clipper chilled most of the northern plains, the president and his secretary of state painted a grim picture of a troubled region that required the urgent attention of the United States. The Suez crisis had destroyed Britain’s traditional influence in the Muslim world, Eisenhower explained, stimulating radical Arab nationalism and opening the door to fresh Soviet inroads. Given “traditional Russian ambitions” in the region and “the present impossibility of France and Britain acting as a counterweight,” Eisenhower insisted that “the United States just cannot leave a vacuum in the Middle East and assume that Russia will stay out.” Having outlined the gravity of the situation, Ike said that he would be asking Congress for “a special economic fund and authorization for the use of military force if necessary.” To avoid “suffering loss of that area to Russia,” Eisenhower concluded, “the United States must put the entire world on notice that we are ready to move instantly.”⁵⁷

During secret testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations the next day, Dulles elaborated more fully on the rationale for what would soon be known as the Eisenhower Doctrine. America’s current problems in the Middle East were “primarily due to the collapse of British power and influence in the area,” he told his listeners. “To keep Russia out has been British policy for the last hundred years, and they have succeeded pretty well up to the present time,” Dulles explained. “Now they are finished, and it is a good deal like the situation was in Greece and Turkey” ten years earlier. Unless the United States assumed important new commitments, “the area will probably fall under Soviet control, and that will be a very great disaster.” Authorizing Eisenhower in advance to use military force, Dulles pointed out, would help “deter open armed attack” by the Soviets and would reassure jittery American friends in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Furthermore, he added, providing U.S. financial aid would help “build up the economies of the free countries there” and prevent communist subversion.⁵⁸

Despite Dulles’s theatrics, several senators expressed grave doubts about the Eisenhower Doctrine. Citing “the horrible example of Korea,” Richard Russell, the Georgia Democrat who chaired the Senate Armed Services Committee, worried that the White House was about to undertake another open-ended military commitment without having assessed the consequences. Hubert Humphrey agreed and chided Dulles for “asking us for a predated declaration of war.” It would be wiser, the Minnesota Democrat insisted, to reassure Amer-

ica's Muslim allies by simply joining the Baghdad Pact.⁵⁹ After spending much time massaging lawmakers who, like Russell and Humphrey, questioned the wisdom of the United States assuming Britain's role in the Middle East, Dulles and Ike won grudging approval for the Eisenhower Doctrine in early March. By margins of 72 to 19 in the Senate and 350 to 60 in the House, Congress authorized the president to use military force and \$200 million in economic aid to support any nation in the Middle East "requesting assistance against armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism."⁶⁰

James P. Richards, a South Carolina Democrat who had chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee before becoming Ike's troubleshooter for the Middle East, soon learned that the Eisenhower Doctrine evoked even more ambivalence in Muslim capitals than it did on Capitol Hill. During a whirlwind tour of fifteen countries in March and April 1957, Richards found the Turks, the Iranians, and the Lebanese eager for more direct U.S. support for regional security.⁶¹ In Jordan, on the other hand, anti-American and pro-Nasser demonstrations forced Richards to cancel his meeting with King Hussein. In Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, Arab conservatives kept their distance to avoid being tarred as U.S. stooges. The radical regimes in Egypt and Syria refused even to extend Richards an invitation.⁶²

Four months after Richards returned to Washington, Syria shocked the Eisenhower administration by announcing a wheat-for-weapons deal with the Kremlin. Damascus and Washington traded ugly charges of political conspiracy and diplomatic bad faith in mid-August. There was "evidence in Syria of the development of a dangerous and classic pattern," Dulles warned Eisenhower on 20 August, a pattern that virtually guaranteed "that the country will fall under the control of International Communism and become a Soviet satellite, whose destinies are directed from Moscow."⁶³ Convinced that he must act quickly or "lose the whole Middle East to Communism," the president ordered the Pentagon to prepare for possible military action and reassured Syria's neighbors that he stood ready to invoke the Eisenhower Doctrine and "come to the assistance of any of them in the event of Syrian or Russian aggression."⁶⁴

Eisenhower's actions received mixed reviews from America's friends and allies. In Ankara, for example, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes saw a "real danger that Syria might become a Soviet satellite" and informed U.S. officials that "Turkey would be prepared if necessary [to] enter [the] picture" to prevent this.⁶⁵ In London, on the other hand, policymakers believed that Washington had overreacted. The Americans, Prime Minister Macmillan grumbled, were "interpreting the new 'Eisenhower Doctrine' with all the enthusiasm of recent converts" to justify "the most drastic measures—Suez in reverse."⁶⁶ Dulles, however, regarded the Syrian crisis as "another Munich," not a second

Suez, and insisted that Nikita Khrushchev was "more like Hitler than any Russian leader we have previously seen."⁶⁷ Although Eisenhower did "not want to repeat the type of pressures that were used on Czechoslovakia to force them to accept Hitler's demands" in 1938, neither did he wish to repeat the mistakes that had transformed a smoldering crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean into a global cataclysm in 1914.⁶⁸ Surprised by British second-guessing and chastened by a nasty warning from the Soviets, who had just tested the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile, the White House began to edge away from invoking the Eisenhower Doctrine in Syria as the summer drew to a close.⁶⁹

Although the president had resisted the temptation to equate events in Damascus in 1957 with those in Prague nineteen years earlier, many in Washington expected that the waning of Britain's influence and the waxing of Russia's would eventually force him to invoke the Eisenhower Doctrine to avert a Middle Eastern Munich. "The long-run hope," Dulles told Macmillan on 19 September, "must be that the Russians will to some extent moderate their ambitions." But because there were at present so few signs of such moderation, Dulles believed that "we need what, in Middle East discussions, we have come to call 'containment plus,'" a strategy designed to halt and reverse recent Soviet gains in the Arab world.⁷⁰ Privately, however, U.S. policymakers suspected that Britain's contribution to this endeavor might well be a net minus. "The British are the first to recognize that they no longer have a paramount position in the area," the State Department's Policy Planning Staff pointed out on 30 October 1957. "The obstacles to the attainment of our objectives are so great and the forces working to weaken the U.S. position in the area are so strong that we cannot exclude the possibility of being faced with a set of circumstances which put up to us squarely the choice of either using force to maintain our position in the area or seeing it disappear entirely."⁷¹

Nine months later a left-wing revolution in Iraq, an abortive coup in Jordan, and a nasty civil war in Lebanon would present the Eisenhower administration with what amounted to a Hobson's choice in the Middle East. On 14 July 1958 anti-Western officers seized power in Baghdad while like-minded conspirators nearly toppled the monarchy next door in Amman. Faced with escalating sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians and convinced that pro-Western elements in Lebanon would soon meet the same fate as their brethren in Iraq, Lebanese president Camille Chamoun asked Eisenhower to send American troops to Beirut to restore order and prevent chaos. Meanwhile, Jordan's King Hussein was clamoring for U.S. or U.K. help to save his throne. The top State Department, Pentagon, and CIA officials who hurried to the Oval Office for a Bastille Day meeting with Eisenhower believed that the United States must respond swiftly.⁷² So did Ike. Noting that the Iraqi revolution had

badly shaken America's friends along the northern tier, "the President said we must act or get out of the Middle East entirely" and prepared to send U.S. marines ashore in Lebanon at a moment's notice.⁷³

Well aware of lingering doubts on Capitol Hill about the wisdom of the Eisenhower Doctrine, the president invited thirty congressional leaders to the White House a few hours later. Insisting that "this is not a matter of a decision already taken," the president asked Dulles to lay out the rationale for intervention. Dulles stressed that the Lebanese crisis was a symbolic test of U.S. credibility, not merely in the Middle East but throughout the Third World. "Turkey, Iran and Pakistan would feel—if we do not act—that our inaction is because we are afraid of the Soviet Union," he explained. "Elsewhere, the impact of not going in—from Morocco to Indo-China—would be very harmful to us." Some of the lawmakers questioned this latest White House prescription for regional defense and worried that the United States was meddling in a civil war. A few, like Senator J. William Fulbright, an Arkansas Democrat, insisted that unless the president could provide real evidence of communist subversion, the Eisenhower Doctrine was probably not applicable to Lebanon. "The crucial question is what the victims believe," Ike retorted; "Chamoun believes it is Soviet Communism that is causing him his trouble."⁷⁴

After Fulbright and the others filed out, Eisenhower confirmed his earlier decision to send in the marines and called Britain's Harold Macmillan with the news. "You are doing a Suez on me," Macmillan joked. Of course Britain would support the U.S. move in Lebanon, he added more seriously. But Macmillan also saw an opportunity to turn the tables on U.S. officials, who for more than a year had been hinting that Whitehall must reconcile itself to a much smaller role in the Middle East.⁷⁵ Noting that King Hussein had just renewed his request for British troops and that Kuwaiti leaders might soon turn to Whitehall for military help as well, Macmillan pressed the White House for what Dulles called "a blank check" to support U.K. intervention in Jordan and the Persian Gulf.⁷⁶ Reluctant at first, Washington did agree to "give *moral* and *logistical* support" after British troops arrived in Amman on 16 July.⁷⁷ "Whatever happens in Iraq and other parts of the area," Eisenhower cabled Macmillan two days later, Britain and the United States must work together in places such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait to ensure that the Middle East "stays within the Western orbit."⁷⁸

By late July, however, few in Washington believed that invoking the Eisenhower Doctrine was the most effective way to keep the region inside the Anglo-American gravitational field. To be sure, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan had interpreted Eisenhower's "gratifying decision" to intervene in Lebanon as what Turkish foreign minister Fatin Zorlu called "a guarantee of our own defense, in [the] event it should become necessary."⁷⁹ U.S. marines did succeed in

restoring order in Beirut without firing a shot, and British paratroopers did prevent an anti-Western coup in Amman.⁸⁰ But none of this changed a simple truth that Eisenhower himself had recognized as the marines waded ashore in Lebanon. "The trouble is that we have a campaign of hatred against us, not by the governments but by the people," he had told Vice-President Richard Nixon on 15 July. "The people are on Nasser's side."⁸¹

While Dulles flew to London at the end of the month to reassure Washington's friends inside the Baghdad Pact, Eisenhower instructed the NSC staff to reevaluate America's approach to the Middle East. The new policy that emerged during the autumn of 1958 did not mark a complete break with the past. The United States remained more determined than ever to prevent the Soviets from overrunning the northern tier. When word arrived from Dulles, for example, that the Iraqi revolution had doomed the Baghdad Pact, Eisenhower swiftly approved a series of executive agreements with Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan that laid the foundations for a new regional defense system, the Central Treaty Organization.⁸² But by early October the White House task force examining the situation in the Middle East had concluded that the Eisenhower Doctrine "must now be regarded as out of date" and that, as a result, some major changes were in order.⁸³ As Ike thumbed through NSC-5820, "U.S. Policy toward the Near East," he found a powerful argument for establishing "an effective working relationship with Arab nationalism" that highlighted Washington's "opposition to external domination and infringement of local sovereignty." This meant that the United States must distance itself from Britain and must "reserve the right to act alone" whenever U.S. and U.K. objectives proved incompatible.⁸⁴

The policies embodied in NSC-5820 were bound to strain Washington's relations with its junior partner in London. When Christian Herter, who had recently succeeded the dying Dulles as secretary of state, reviewed America's new approach with British officials in April 1959, Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd "said his main anxiety was that the United Kingdom and the United States should not drift apart in their policies towards the Middle East."⁸⁵ Fourteen months later Eisenhower approved a pair of policy papers suggesting that Lloyd's anxiety was not unfounded. The first prophesied that Britain's decline as a power in the Middle East would soon accelerate. "Over a period of time, Arab nationalism may be expected to bring increasing pressure on the British position in the various U.K. dependencies on the Arabian Peninsula," the drafters of NSC-6011 pointed out on 17 June 1960.⁸⁶ The second identified a leading candidate to succeed Britain as America's junior partner in the Middle East. According to NSC-6010, a review of Iranian-American relations completed in early July, "Iran is deeply disturbed by pan-Arabism . . . as a possible barrier to Iranian aspirations in the Persian Gulf" and "considers itself the logical heir

to present British influence in the area."⁸⁷ During the decade ahead Eisenhower's successors would work hard to convert Iran and other conservative Muslim regimes into America's regional proxies.

Pillars and Proxies: The Making of the Nixon Doctrine, 1961–1972

By the time Ike left office, the Eisenhower Doctrine, a policy designed to defend the Middle East by combining U.S. military muscle with U.K. political savoir faire, had become strategically irrelevant thanks to the rise of Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism and the fall of Britain's informal empire. Although Middle East defense was far down John F. Kennedy's list of priorities during the spring of 1961, the Massachusetts Democrat had been highly critical of the Eisenhower Doctrine during his stint on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the late 1950s. Convinced that Dulles's anticommunist pactomania and Ike's gunboat diplomacy had sparked a backlash among Arab nationalists who regarded U.S. intervention as merely the reincarnation of British imperialism, the Kennedy administration hoped that the shah of Iran or the House of Saud would fill the vacuum created by Whitehall's eventual departure from the region.

Any doubts regarding the importance of filling that vacuum sooner rather than later disappeared early that summer, when Britain's decision to shut down its military installations in Kuwait led Iraq to resurrect its long-standing claim to London's oil-rich protectorate. "If Persian Gulf shajhdoms were going to break loose from their traditional association with the U.K.," Parker Hart, America's new ambassador to Saudi Arabia, warned Kennedy in late June, "in a sense it became 'open season' for larger neighboring powers to assert such claims that they might have."⁸⁸ In the short run Kennedy had little choice but to encourage Britain to reassert its military presence in the Middle East. The United States, he assured U.K. officials on 29 June 1961, would "give full political and logistic support" to British troops deployed in the Persian Gulf "to forestall any Iraq attempt to take over Kuwait by force."⁸⁹ Over the long haul, however, U.S. policymakers preferred an "Arab solution" to the crisis and applauded Saudi Arabia's decision in mid-July to put several hundred of its own troops at the disposal of the Kuwaiti government. As the summer drew to a close, Riyadh's plans for "replacing [the] British with troops from Arab League member states" bore fruit with the arrival of a Saudi-led multilateral force in Kuwait that enabled Whitehall to bring its soldiers home on 19 September.⁹⁰

Although the Kennedy administration was grateful for Saudi help in forging an Arab solution to the crisis in Kuwait, most U.S. officials questioned

whether the House of Saud was sufficiently strong or reliable to fill by itself the vacuum resulting from Britain's eventual withdrawal from the Persian Gulf. King Saud, the eldest son of the dynasty's founder, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, had "projected a bad image" in Washington, Parker Hart recalled long afterward, because of his "extravagance, particularly the extravagance of his sons, his unwillingness or inability to control them, the enormous amount of wastage of funds."⁹¹ Worse than the king's profligacy was his fickleness, symbolized as early as March 1961 by his cancellation of the Pentagon's lease on the Dhahran airfield, an important transit facility that had linked U.S. military operations in Western Europe with those in East Asia for fifteen years.⁹²

Unwilling to rely solely on the corrupt and unpredictable House of Saud to shore up sagging Western interests in the Middle East, the architects of Kennedy's national security policy included in their blueprint a second pillar: Iran. To be sure, prospects for grooming the shah of Iran to succeed John Bull as one of Uncle Sam's sentinels in the Persian Gulf seemed bleak during JFK's first year in office. The forty-two-year-old absolutist who sat atop the Peacock Throne in Tehran was every bit as autocratic and temperamental as his counterpart in Riyadh, and his realm was as badly in need of reform as the Saudi monarchy. Despite its chronic internal political problems, however, Iran remained an active member of the Central Treaty Organization, possessed one of the largest armies in the area, and proved eager to play an expanded role in regional defense. With the British "revamping their military planning, and gravitating south of Suez" toward the Indian Ocean, the shah assured Secretary of State Dean Rusk in April 1962 that Iran stood ready to step into the breach provided that the United States delivered enough guns and dollars under the auspices of Kennedy's Military Assistance Program.⁹³

Fearful that the shah's regional ambitions might slow the pace of long-overdue reforms and divert resources from badly needed development projects, Kennedy asked Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson to visit Tehran during his trip to the Middle East four months later. Johnson, who also made stops in Athens and Ankara, confirmed that the Greeks, the Turks, and the Iranians "remain vigilant and faithful, despite communist threats and abuse" and recommended more U.S. economic aid to ensure that "these rimland states" were able to "maintain their armed forces along the underbelly of the [Soviet] Bloc." He believed that much of the aid should find its way to the man on the Peacock Throne. "In Iran, we must accept the Shah, with his shortcomings, as a valuable asset," Johnson advised Kennedy on 10 September 1962. "We should carefully determine the real military potential, present and future, of the Shah's military forces and allocate [military assistance] to them in a context of global U.S. security interests."⁹⁴

Yet in a global context, sorting out America's relationships with Iran or

Saudi Arabia did not rank high on Kennedy's list of priorities during his final year in office. Indeed, most of JFK's time and energy through November 1963 were devoted to handling far more acute problems: the nuclear test ban treaty with Russia, the diplomatic grudge match with French president Charles de Gaulle over the future of NATO, and the military quagmire emerging in Vietnam. Nevertheless, in the months before his death Kennedy seriously considered a plan "to beef up our capabilities in the Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf/Red Sea area" proposed by White House Middle East expert Robert Komer. "We have traditionally left the defense of this region to the British," Komer pointed out on 19 June 1963, "yet their strength is waning at a time when we face a potential show of force or actual combat needs ranging from Saudi Arabia to the Persian Gulf and Iran through India and Burma to Malaysia." By re-deploying a naval task force from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean, Kennedy could "give quite a fillip" to America's friends and "lend more credibility to our statements we could support them effectively if the need arose."⁹⁵ Intrigued by Komer's proposal, JFK passed it along to the Pentagon with a chit asking, "What about this?"⁹⁶ The U.S. Navy liked the idea of an Indian Ocean squadron, Komer informed his boss on 6 September, because it "buys us credibility in Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Iran, Pakistan, India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia—all for one price."⁹⁷

It was, however, a price that not everyone at the Pentagon was eager to pay. Preoccupied with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Vietnam during the autumn of 1963, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara balked at assuming additional military burdens in the Middle East and had yet to respond to the White House proposal when Kennedy left for Dallas in mid-November. Although Lyndon B. Johnson shared McNamara's fixation on Vietnam, in March 1964 the new president approved periodic naval deployments in the Indian Ocean, hoping thereby to thicken the thin Western defense perimeter that stretched east from the Persian Gulf to Singapore.⁹⁸

Despite LBJ's best efforts, that perimeter showed signs of growing even thinner at the end of the year, when Britain's new Labour government began to reassess all U.K. military commitments in the Middle East. Convinced that "the British position in the area will continue to erode," by late 1965 State Department planners were urging that "greater attention should thus be given to the provision of other capabilities 'over the horizon' to meet the continuing need for the West to be able to react quickly with small forces in local crises in the oil rich Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the region."⁹⁹ One of the most attractive of these capabilities lay in the Indian Ocean 2,500 miles south of the Straits of Hormuz at Diego Garcia, a tiny island controlled by the British, who in short order agreed to allow the Pentagon to establish a naval base on the V-shaped atoll.¹⁰⁰

On 22 February 1966, however, Whitehall unveiled a White Paper that suggested that something more substantial than a base at Diego Garcia would be required to fill the vacuum created by Britain's inexorable decline as a regional power. A rising budget deficit and a falling pound sterling, Prime Minister Harold Wilson had informed LBJ during an Oval Office meeting two months earlier, would necessitate "readjustments in the British defense posture East of Suez." Although Wilson insisted that "the British world-wide role would be maintained," he made it clear that U.K. retrenchment in the Middle East was unavoidable. The Labour government, he told Johnson, was preparing to abandon the crown colony at Aden in southwestern Arabia and was also seeking ways "to lighten the British presence in the [Persian] Gulf."¹⁰¹ Once Whitehall's decisions became public knowledge in early 1966, U.S. officials in London wasted little time spelling out the implications for American policy in the region. "There is no denying that British power and influence have relatively run down," Chargé d'Affaires Philip Kaiser advised Foggy Bottom on 23 May. "The accelerated rate of contraction of British interests in the Middle East," Kaiser added, had already triggered "many nagging difficulties connected with 'bits and pieces' of a dissolving British colonial domain which affect us in a number of direct and indirect ways."¹⁰²

By the summer of 1966 the Johnson administration had begun to address some of those nagging difficulties by adopting a "two pillars" policy in the Persian Gulf that called for Saudi Arabia and Iran to assume many of Britain's responsibilities for defending the region. When King Faisal visited the White House in June, for example, Johnson sought Saudi help "to fill the gap the British will leave in South Arabia and the Persian Gulf." After Faisal hinted that this would require his kingdom to upgrade its arsenal, LBJ approved the sale of \$100 million in nonlethal military hardware—mostly trucks and jeeps—to strengthen America's emerging partnership with the House of Saud.¹⁰³

The most enthusiastic candidate to succeed John Bull as the region's policeman, however, was the shah of Iran, who dreamed of combining his nation's fabulous oil wealth with high-tech U.S. weaponry to recapture the ancient grandeur of Cyrus the Great. In the wake of Whitehall's February 1966 White Paper the shah, like King Faisal and LBJ, "worried that the British may eventually withdraw from the Persian Gulf," where the Soviets and their Arab clients were always eager to fish in troubled waters. By mid-July the Iranian monarch was insisting that Washington sell him a squadron of F-4 Phantom jets comparable to the MIG-21s that Moscow had recently promised to Cairo and Baghdad. Although the supersonic squadron's \$50 million price tag threatened to bust Iran's budget, national security adviser Walt W. Rostow reminded President Johnson that "with the British pulling out of South Arabia and re-

trenching in the Persian Gulf" and with U.S. military involvement in Vietnam escalating rapidly, beefing up the shah's arsenal was the most cost-effective method of promoting Middle East defense. Not only did Johnson approve the sale of the Phantoms in early August; he also provided \$200 million in revolving credit to finance future Iranian arms purchases.¹⁰⁴

The new year brought fresh indications that Saudi Arabia and Iran might have to assume their new roles as regional policemen sooner rather than later. While most eyes were riveted on the Egyptian-Israeli showdown that culminated in the Six Day War in June, throughout the spring of 1967 and into the summer, U.S. Middle East experts watched Whitehall fight a losing battle against shadowy Soviet-backed guerrilla movements such as the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen and the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf. Plagued by acute imperial overstretch from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia and afflicted by chronic underemployment at home, Britain's Labour government edged ever closer to liquidating what remained of the empire east of Suez. Convinced that such drastic action would merely reinforce the growing impression in Washington of "a Little England" important chiefly for "thatched cottages and Beefeaters or mini-skirts and Beatles," British ambassador Patrick Dean warned his superiors in late October that a policy of scuttle from Bahrain to Singapore would produce "a qualitative change in the Anglo-American relationship."¹⁰⁵

Despite Dean's words of caution, the British government took a series of increasingly drastic actions during the following three months. On 18 November Whitehall devalued the pound sterling by 15 percent in a bid to cure Britain's deepening balance of payments problems. On 20 December Chancellor of the Exchequer Roy Jenkins stunned the Cabinet by declaring that unless they sliced £300 million from the budget, "we had come to the point of defeat on the economic road." On 3 January 1968 Harold Wilson and Foreign Secretary George Brown agreed that the only way to make such large cuts was for Britain to cut its losses east of Suez. Convinced that "we could not stay in the [Persian] Gulf after we had withdrawn from the Far East," the Cabinet concluded that "an early announcement was absolutely necessary" in order to prepare "the local administrations concerned to protect foreign oil installations."¹⁰⁶

A week later George Brown crossed the Atlantic to break the bad news to the Johnson administration, which did not react well to the prospect of Britain withdrawing from the Persian Gulf and the Far East, except Hong Kong, within three years. "I had a bloody unpleasant meeting in Washington this morning," Brown cabled Whitehall on 11 January, "with [Dean] Rusk," who grumbled that "we had got our priorities wrong" and pleaded, "For God's sake, be Britain."¹⁰⁷ What was being proposed here was "tantamount to British withdrawal from world affairs," Rusk thundered, and Brown should know that "the

US could not and would not fill the vacuum."¹⁰⁸ Echoing his secretary of state, Johnson insisted that "accelerated British withdrawal both from its Far Eastern bases and from the Persian Gulf would create most serious problems . . . for the security of the entire free world," and he implored Harold Wilson to "postpone any irrevocable steps" east of Suez "until other stable arrangements can be put in place."¹⁰⁹

Ambassador David Bruce, who relayed Johnson's concerns to London, doubted that the Labour government had any interest in postponement. Whitehall's "calamitous, destructive, selfish, [and] myopic" decisions in the Persian Gulf and the Far East, Bruce cabled Washington on 15 January, showed "the most deplorable resolve, except for Munich, that any British Government has taken during the last 150 years."¹¹⁰ Within hours LBJ received a poignant "Dear Lyndon" letter from Harold Wilson describing the abandonment of empire east of Suez as "the most difficult and the heaviest" decision that he and most other Britons could remember. "This does not mean," Wilson insisted, "a British withdrawal from world affairs" but, rather, that "the British people were sick and tired of being thought willing to eke out a comfortable existence on borrowed money." Only by bringing its commitments more closely into line with its resources, Wilson concluded, "can Britain find the new place on the world stage that I firmly believe the British people ardently desire."¹¹¹

Later that evening on the other side of the Atlantic David Bruce's old friend Averell Harriman, who had served every Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt as a diplomatic troubleshooter, had a blunt chat with Harold Wilson's representative in Washington. Nicknamed "the Crocodile" because he never minced words, Harriman told Ambassador Patrick Dean, "We cannot accept this decision as final. It must be reversed." The British diplomat retorted, "Well, it's been made." Insisting that "the U.S. cannot be the only world power on the Free World side," Harriman testily reminded Dean that "your government has fantastic interests in the Middle East" and that U.K. retrenchment "opens the door for an easier way for the Russians to take your place and push us still further out."¹¹²

While the Crocodile snapped at Ambassador Dean, Walt Rostow, who wielded immense influence on LBJ's foreign policy, sprang into action. Adopting as his motto "Don't Mourn, Organize," Rostow informed Johnson on 16 January that the NSC staff had begun to consider "how nations in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia can fill the gap left by the British, with our encouragement." Although Rostow expected the defense perimeter along the Pacific rim to remain extremely fluid, he prophesied that Australia, Indonesia, and Japan would eventually assume Whitehall's strategic role from the Malaca Straits to the China Sea. The situation in the Persian Gulf, on the other hand, already

seemed clear. Iran and Saudi Arabia—“both rich and increasingly confident”—were eager to play expanded roles in regional defense but were “uncertain as to how to proceed.” If the United States could “give them both encouragement and sell them arms,” Rostow believed that the Iranians and the Saudis would fill the vacuum created by Britain’s departure from the Middle East.¹¹³

Lyndon Johnson saw the beauty of Rostow’s scheme at once. In short order Washington approved King Faisal’s request for an arms package including jet aircraft, agreed to expedite the shah’s latest appeal for U.S. military hardware, and mediated a complex dispute over drilling rights for offshore oil in the Persian Gulf that threatened to poison relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹¹⁴ Later that spring Johnson invited both the shah and Saudi crown prince Khalid, Faisal’s heir apparent, to the White House to review Persian Gulf security issues.¹¹⁵ “Close cooperation between Shah and Faisal [is] of greatest importance,” State Department officials emphasized in their briefing materials, “in assuring stability in Gulf after British withdrawal.”¹¹⁶ To be sure, Johnson’s advisers continued to worry that Saudi Arabia and Iran might not be up to the task and told U.K. officials in September 1968 that “if the situation really began to deteriorate the U.S. and everyone else concerned would look to the British.”¹¹⁷ But when LBJ departed the White House four months later, the foundations of America’s new strategy for assuring stability in the Middle East were in place. By early 1969 the U.S. Navy had begun preliminary work on its new over-the-horizon facility at Diego Garcia, Saudi Arabia and Iran were edging toward agreement regarding their mutual responsibilities in the Persian Gulf, and modest amounts of U.S. weaponry were on their way to Riyadh and Tehran.

Although the Johnson administration had drafted the blueprint, Richard Nixon gave the new U.S. strategic doctrine in the Middle East its name. Attributing his narrow victory in the November 1968 elections to mounting popular frustration with LBJ’s costly but ineffective war in Vietnam, the California Republican entered office on 20 January hoping to reduce the risk of military involvement in the Third World by relying on pro-Western proxies to be armed and bankrolled by the United States. The earliest and best example of this approach surfaced in Asia under the guise of “Vietnamization.” On the eve of a midsummer minisummit meeting with South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu on Guam, Nixon announced that America’s “Asian friends” were going to have to assume more of the initiative and also bear more of the burden for promoting regional security than they had in the past. When it came to “military defense, except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons,” Lyndon Johnson’s successor told reporters on 25 July 1969 in words that quickly became known as the Nixon Doctrine, “the

United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves."¹¹⁸

While the Pentagon moved gradually to Vietnamize the ground war in Southeast Asia by beginning to withdraw the half-million GIs that Johnson had sent to Indochina, the White House moved swiftly to apply the Nixon Doctrine to the Middle East. Two weeks before Nixon flew to Guam, he had approved National Security Study Memorandum 66, which established an interdepartmental task force to determine how best to handle "the problems created by withdrawal from the [Persian] Gulf of the British presence." In September 1969 the task force confirmed that the most attractive option was to rely increasingly on oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Iran as America's sentinels in the area.¹¹⁹ Eager to expand its strategic role in the Persian Gulf, between 1969 and 1972 the House of Saud used its burgeoning oil revenues to double its defense spending from \$700 million to \$1.4 billion and used its diplomatic influence to help persuade six tiny sheikdoms in Southeast Arabia formerly controlled by the British to establish a pro-Western federation, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With the Nixon administration's blessing, King Faisal also set up an elite military academy to provide state-of-the-art training for Saudi officers and pilots and purchased a broad range of Western military hardware, including American F-5E fighter-bombers.¹²⁰

The most enthusiastic proponent of the new Nixon Doctrine in the Middle East, however, remained the shah of Iran, whose grandiose scheme to transform his realm into a great power coincided nicely with Washington's desire to shift the costs of regional defense from the U.S. taxpayer to stable and well-armed proxies in the Third World. As early as October 1969 the shah had outlined for U.S. officials his plans to use his rising reservoir of petrodollars to finance a military buildup that would dwarf parallel Saudi efforts that were just getting under way across the Persian Gulf.¹²¹ By September 1970 the CIA was touting the shah as "a confident powerful autocrat" who seemed "determined to ensure for Iran a position of power and leadership in the Persian Gulf after the British withdrawal."¹²² Six months later Secretary of State William P. Rogers termed the shah "statesmanlike," called his realm "a constructive force in the region," and "urged Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States to cooperate in fostering stability and progress" throughout the area.¹²³ "In effect," Assistant Secretary of Defense James Noyes, a Middle East specialist who helped Foggy Bottom lay the groundwork for the Nixon Doctrine during 1971, recalled long afterward, "Iran and Saudi Arabia were to receive U.S. support for the sake of their own strength and for keeping peace in the region."¹²⁴

On 30 May 1972 Air Force One banked high over the Caspian Sea and swooped down just outside Tehran. Fresh from their summit meeting in Mos-

cow with Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev, Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, hoped that “one of America’s closest allies, the Shah of Iran,” could help prevent the Kremlin from taking advantage of Whitehall’s “historic withdrawal of its forces and military protection from the Persian Gulf.”¹²⁵ The president, State Department briefers had suggested three weeks earlier, should “commend the Shah for his farsighted recognition of Iran’s responsibilities as a regional power and say this was precisely what you had in mind when you enunciated the Nixon Doctrine.”¹²⁶

The shah’s visitors were determined that Iran should assume its role as America’s proxy sooner rather than later. According to one U.S. official then in a position to know, Nixon looked his host in the eye and said simply, “Protect me.”¹²⁷ Well aware that “there was no possibility of assigning any American military forces to the Indian Ocean in the midst of the Vietnam war and its attendant trauma,” Nixon and Kissinger were relieved that “Iran was willing to play this role.” What the Iranians expected in return, however, was access to all nonnuclear hardware in America’s arsenal, including F-14 and F-15 supersonic jets. Because “the Shah was willing to pay for the equipment out of his oil revenues” and because he was “a vital ally carrying burdens which otherwise we would have had to assume,” Nixon promised to sell the aircraft to Iran and “added a proviso that in the future Iranian requests should not be second-guessed.”¹²⁸

Upon their return to Washington Nixon and Kissinger swiftly showed that they meant what they said. In short order the White House approved an arms package that included supersonic aircraft, laser-guided bombs, and helicopter gunships, which the Pentagon was to deliver “as promptly as possible.” To expedite delivery, “decisions on the acquisition of military equipment should be left primarily to the government of Iran.”¹²⁹ Never known for restraint when it came to shopping lists, during the next five years the shah would shell out \$16.2 billion—nearly seven times what he had spent during the preceding two decades—for U.S. planes, tanks, warships, and other sophisticated weapons systems. He wasted little time demonstrating his eagerness to promote Western interests in the Persian Gulf. When the sultan of Oman needed help snuffing out a Soviet-backed uprising in Dhofar province in early 1973, the shah delighted the Nixon administration by using his recently acquired U.S. helicopters to ferry 1,200 Iranian commandos to Southeast Arabia. “We are trying to checkmate Soviet influence wherever it appears and to exhaust them in any adventures they may pursue,” Kissinger told the shah in July. Iran would help the United States fulfill these objectives in Oman before the year was over.¹³⁰

Thanks to the enthusiastic support of America’s friends in Riyadh and Tehran, then, by the mid-1970s the Nixon Doctrine actually seemed to be more

effective in the Middle East than in Southeast Asia, the site of its first application. Unlike Washington's client regime in South Vietnam, which collapsed like a house of cards in April 1975, two years after the last GI flew out of Than Son Nhut airport, Saudi Arabia and Iran stood firm as America's twin pillars in the Muslim world. Indeed, as Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger prepared for a White House meeting with the shah just two weeks after the fall of Saigon, they took considerable comfort that U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf seemed anchored in far safer waters than the Tonkin Gulf. "There is no doubt that the Shah, should he survive a sufficient number of years, will have a key, if not the controlling, role among the regional powers in helping to assure stability in the Persian Gulf area," Kissinger assured his boss in the Oval Office on 13 May 1975. "It has been a cardinal point in our policy over the past several years to encourage Iran to intensify its cooperation with other moderate anti-communist states in the Gulf region, particularly Saudi Arabia."¹³¹

By late 1976 U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East seemed more secure than they had at any time since the British had commenced their slow-motion retreat thirty years earlier. Well-armed pro-American Muslim sentinels were standing guard on both sides of the Persian Gulf, and U.S. Navy Seabees were completing work on a \$100 million port and communications facility over the horizon on Diego Garcia. Despite recent Russian arms deliveries to Iraq and South Yemen, U.S. intelligence took heart that "increased wealth has permitted a new self-assertiveness on the part of the major local states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are determined to prevent Soviet encroachment." Thanks to "its rapidly expanding military strength," CIA experts pointed out one month after Gerald Ford failed in his bid to become president in his own right, Iran in particular "has expressed a commitment to police the Gulf and exclude foreign intrusions." The principal danger to America's clients, the intelligence analysts concluded, came not from external intervention but, rather, from internal instability. However remote the possibility, a radical takeover in Riyadh or Tehran would mean that "doors now shut would open to the Soviets elsewhere in the Gulf, and they would quickly enlarge their presence."¹³² Although Ford, Kissinger, and other high-ranking U.S. officials remained confident that the Nixon Doctrine had contained the Kremlin and laid a solid foundation for order and progress in the Middle East, their successors would see the CIA's worst-case scenario come to pass.

America Stands Alone: The Carter Doctrine

Jimmy Carter was elected president in November 1976 largely because the voting public perceived him as far more honest than Richard Nixon and far more intelligent than Gerald Ford. Carter had reinforced these perceptions during his

campaign by promising not only to clean up domestic political corruption symbolized by Nixon's Watergate scandal but also to clear up the ambiguities surrounding Soviet-American détente symbolized by Ford's election-year foreign policy gaffes. One area where the Georgia Democrat did not distance himself from the policies of his predecessors, however, was the Persian Gulf. He embraced the Nixon Doctrine and continued to rely on the shah of Iran to promote political stability and prevent Kremlin inroads. But the shah's seemingly limitless appetite for U.S. military hardware soon gave the new president pause. The anti-Western revolution that rocked Iran and toppled the Pahlavi dynasty in early 1979 sent U.S. policymakers scrambling for a new strategy in the region. After the Soviets sent troops into Afghanistan at the end of the year, the White House unveiled the Carter Doctrine, signaling that, at long last, the United States was reluctantly willing to assume the lonely burden of protecting Western interests in the Persian Gulf that Great Britain had shouldered through the early 1970s.

The policies that the Carter administration inherited from Nixon and Ford seemed, at first glance, to constitute low-risk, cost-effective tactics for preventing trouble in a strategically important part of the world. U.S. efforts "to assist and encourage Iran to become a regional power which would assume limited security responsibilities and play a generally more active role supportive of our mutual interests," a State Department transition briefing paper pointed out on 3 January 1977, had largely succeeded. "Iran has accepted this role—for it was consistent with the Shah's view of Iran's key position in the area—and has used its military power (in Oman), its financial strength (loans to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan and Syria) and its general influence to help resolve regional disputes."¹³³ Cyrus Vance, who moved into the seventh floor at Foggy Bottom three weeks later, saw a certain logic to recent U.S. policy in the region. "The Shah's determination that Iran must assume more responsibility in the gulf coincided with the adoption of the 'Nixon Doctrine' which envisioned key regional states as surrogates for American military power in preserving order and blocking Soviet inroads," Vance recalled in his memoirs, and the Carter administration "recognized the importance of Iran in Persian Gulf security matters."¹³⁴

National security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who second-guessed Cyrus Vance on just about everything from human rights to nuclear disarmament, shared the secretary of state's faith in the Nixon Doctrine in the Persian Gulf. Praising Carter's predecessors for "building up" Iran and Saudi Arabia "as the two American-backed pillars of regional security," Brzezinski agreed that the shah had become "our major strategic asset in the wake of the British disengagement from 'east of Suez'" during the Nixon and Ford years. "Recognizing Iran's strategic centrality," he remarked several years later, "we chose to

continue that policy, approving major sales of arms" to the shah, whose realm was the "pivot of a protected tier shielding the crucial oil-rich region of the Persian Gulf from possible Soviet intrusion."¹³⁵ Gary Sick, a holdover from the Ford administration who quickly emerged as the chief Iran specialist in the Carter White House, confirmed that "the Nixon-Kissinger policy of placing U.S. security interests in the Persian Gulf almost exclusively in the hands of the shah had been fully absorbed by the bureaucracy and the U.S. power structure." But for Sick the downside to the Nixon Doctrine was obvious. "The United States now lay strategically naked beneath the thin blanket of Iranian security," he observed long afterward. "By the time President Carter arrived in the White House," Sick added, "whether one liked it or not, Iran was the regional tail wagging the superpower dog."¹³⁶

By all accounts Jimmy Carter liked it less and less the longer he was in office. Worried that continued U.S. arms sales to the shah and other autocratic Third World clients under the auspices of the Nixon Doctrine would divert resources from economic development, weaken respect for human rights, and, in the long run, undermine political stability, Carter sent Secretary of State Vance to Tehran in May 1977 in hopes of developing "a better way of determining Iran's future military needs and how they could best be met." Vance assured the shah that the Carter administration still wished to work closely with him on a plan "for denying the Soviets opportunities to increase their influence" in the Persian Gulf. He confirmed that Washington would deliver the F-16 jet fighters and AWACS electronic surveillance aircraft that Iran had ordered earlier, but not high-performance F-18 fighter-bombers. He gently reminded the shah that the Georgia Democrat regarded "the primacy of human rights as a national goal."¹³⁷

Although Vance returned from Tehran convinced that the visit had gone reasonably well, in almost no time the tail tried to wag the dog. The shah, Iranian ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi complained on 28 May, was finding Carter's more stringent controls on arms sales "disappointing" in light of Iran's informal alliance with the United States and was privately asking himself, "Was this a special relationship?" Vance replied that Washington fully intended to continue providing Tehran with "advanced weaponry to offset quantitative and other disadvantages in order to maintain a regional balance." Indeed, he reminded Zahedi, "our [arms] sales to Iran this year will be larger than to any other country and about one half of the total." In short, Zahedi's boss could rest assured that "there is and will continue to be a special relationship between the U.S. and Iran."¹³⁸

When Mohammed Reza Pahlavi visited the United States six months later, however, there were signs that the relationship was becoming less and less special. As he stepped onto the south lawn of the White House on 15 Novem-

ber with President Carter at his side, the shah was taunted by thousands of jeering Iranian exchange students who had poured into Washington from college and university campuses across the country to vent their frustration over autocratic rule in their homeland. Before long, jittery police tried to disperse the huge crowd with tear gas, which wafted toward the two heads of state, who beat a watery-eyed retreat indoors. Once inside, a dry-eyed shah dazzled Carter and his top advisers with “an excellent analysis of the troubled situation around the Persian Gulf,” where Iran was using its U.S. military hardware to promote Western interests. But when Carter remarked that mullahs and middle-class students were making human rights a front-page issue in Iran and asked the shah to consider “easing off on some of the strict police policies,” he was greeted with stony silence. “There is nothing I can do,” the shah replied somewhat sadly. “I must enforce the Iranian laws, which are designed to combat communism.” Dissidents such as those chanting “Death to the Shah” outside the White House, he insisted, were “really just a tiny minority, and have no support among the vast majority of [the] Iranian people.”¹³⁹

Despite his own suspicion that the shah’s heavy-handed policies would eventually backfire, Carter continued to hope for the best. At a White House dinner later that evening, for example, he made light of the ugly incident earlier in the day, joking that “there’s one thing I can say about the Shah—he knows how to draw a crowd” and hailing the guest of honor as “a stabilizing influence . . . throughout the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and with a growing degree of influence, in the Western World.”¹⁴⁰ Six weeks later during a New Year’s Eve gala in Tehran hosted by Pahlavi, the Georgia Democrat toasted the Persian king as a staunch ally and firm friend. “Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah,” Carter gushed in words that would soon ring hollow, “is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world.”¹⁴¹

Even as Islamic revolution rocked the Peacock Throne during the first half of 1978, few U.S. officials were willing to admit that one of the central pillars of the Nixon Doctrine was about to crumble. “American security strategy for the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and ultimately all of Southwest Asia had, over a period of more than a decade, come to be based squarely on the premise that Iran was and would continue to be a strong, stable regional power whose interests coincided with those of the United States,” the NSC’s Gary Sick recalled. As Ayatollah Khomeini brought the Iranian revolution to a crescendo in early 1979, Carter’s advisers were asking themselves, “How can U.S. policy interests be preserved if the shah falls?”¹⁴²

Before the year was over, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would make answering that question far more difficult—and also far more important. An arid, landlocked, and mountainous kingdom, Afghanistan had always been a

buffer state, first between the expanding British and Russian empires and then, after 1945, between the Free World and the Soviet bloc. As was the case next door in Tehran, rapid modernization generated serious political turmoil in Kabul, where Afghan communists seized power in a bloody coup in April 1978. Although the upheaval in Afghanistan came as welcome news at the Kremlin, Cyrus Vance recalled long afterward that “we had no evidence of Soviet complicity in the coup.”¹⁴³ Neither Vance nor his colleagues, however, were pleased by the communist takeover in Kabul. “Afghanistan as Finland is probably inevitable,” Gary Sick remarked shortly after the April revolution, “but an Afghan Hungary is a positive danger to the long-term stability of the entire region.”¹⁴⁴

By the spring of 1979, however, the news from Afghanistan sounded more like something out of Budapest than Helsinki. Mired in a nasty war with Islamic guerrillas, the left-wing regime in Kabul sought help from Moscow, which dispatched several hundred military advisers in March. Three months later at a summit meeting with Leonid Brezhnev in Vienna, Jimmy Carter hinted that further Russian intervention in Afghanistan would jeopardize Soviet-American détente. “We have certain areas of vital interest . . . in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula,” Carter pointed out on 17 June, and “there are many problems in Iran and Afghanistan.” For its part, “the United States has not interfered in the internal affairs of those nations,” he told Brezhnev. “We expect the Soviet Union to do the same.” Brezhnev was not amused. “Don’t blame the Soviet Union for changes taking place in the world,” he growled. “Soviet leaders are very careful not to categorize the United States as ‘adversary’ or ‘foe,’ and we want the same treatment from you.”¹⁴⁵

Before the end of the year, relations between Washington and Moscow would become downright adversarial. While Carter and Brezhnev traded barbs over how best to verify the SALT II agreement and how much importance to place on a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, the situation in Afghanistan went from bad to worse. With factional infighting among Afghan communists undermining the war against the Islamic radicals and weakening Moscow’s influence, on Christmas Eve the Kremlin airlifted thousands of Russian commandos into Afghanistan, where they installed a staunchly pro-Soviet regime. “In this extremely difficult situation, which has threatened the gains of the April revolution and the interests of maintaining our national security,” Brezhnev’s top advisers told the Politburo a week later, “a decision has been made to send the necessary contingent of the Soviet army to Afghanistan.” Although evidence to the contrary may well remain locked inside the Russian archives, materials released thus far suggest that Moscow’s military intervention in Kabul was probably a defensive maneuver and not the first step in a Kremlin master plan to drive the United States out of the Persian Gulf.¹⁴⁶

The situation looked different from Washington's end of the telescope, however. For more than a year national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had been warning Jimmy Carter about an "arc of crisis" stretching from the Horn of Africa to the Persian Gulf, where Britain's departure, the fall of the shah, and Russian meddling threatened U.S. interests. "If the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan," Brzezinski informed his boss a few hours after the Red Army arrived in Kabul, "the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled" at America's expense. "Historically, the British provided the barrier to that drive and Afghanistan was their buffer state," he concluded. "We assumed that role in 1945, but the Iranian crisis has led to the collapse of the balance of power in Southwest Asia, and it could produce Soviet presence right down on the edge of the Arabian and Oman Gulfs."¹⁴⁷ Carter had to move decisively to create "a new 'security framework,'" Brzezinski insisted in the waning days of 1979, not only "to reassert U.S. power and influence in the region" but also "to demonstrate his genuine toughness."¹⁴⁸ Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, on the other hand, counseled restraint. "My view was that Moscow had acted as it did . . . to protect Soviet political interests in Afghanistan which they saw endangered," he recalled in his memoirs. "They feared that the regime would be replaced by a fundamentalist Islamic government and that this would, in turn, be followed by a spread of 'Khomeini fever' to other nations along Russia's southern border."¹⁴⁹

Preoccupied with events in Tehran, where Iranian radicals held fifty-two American hostages, and confronted with polling data showing that the public regarded him as too weak to warrant reelection in November, Jimmy Carter sided with his national security adviser. "This is deliberate aggression that calls into question détente and the way we have been doing business with the Soviets for the past decade," he told White House chief of staff Hamilton Jordan on 27 December.¹⁵⁰ "This was the first time they had used their troops to expand their sphere of influence since they had overthrown the government of Czechoslovakia in February 1948," Carter observed in his memoirs, with a bow to Harry Truman. "A successful take-over of Afghanistan would give the Soviets a deep penetration between Iran and Pakistan and pose a threat to the rich oil fields of the Persian Gulf area."¹⁵¹

On 2 January 1980 the embattled Georgia Democrat and his NSC adopted a hard-line response to what they saw as an unprecedented act of Soviet aggression. The United States would embargo all grain exports to Russia, withdraw from the Summer Olympics to be held in Moscow, and create a "Rapid Deployment Force" capable of airlifting U.S. troops to the Persian Gulf at a moment's notice. The president made the new Carter Doctrine the centerpiece of his annual state of the union address three weeks later. "The implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan could pose the most serious threat to the

peace since the Second World War," Carter told the nation on 23 January. Echoing the Missouri Democrat who had stood in the same spot a generation earlier, he issued a call to arms. "Let our position be absolutely clear," Carter remarked solemnly. "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."¹⁵²

The allusions to the Truman Doctrine were hardly a coincidence. "You have the opportunity to do what President Truman did on Greece and Turkey," Zbigniew Brzezinski had reminded Jimmy Carter in early January. "You might want to think of a 'Carter Doctrine.'"¹⁵³ Although Carter avoided drawing explicit comparisons between himself and Truman during the 1980 election campaign, "Give 'Em Hell Harry's" get-tough policy toward the Kremlin in the Middle East was implicit every time "Give 'Em Heck Jimmy" mentioned Afghanistan, new U.S. strategic bases in Somalia and Oman, or the Pentagon's proposed Rapid Deployment Force. Brzezinski removed any remaining doubts about the matter several years later when he stated categorically in his memoirs, "The Carter Doctrine was modeled on the Truman Doctrine."¹⁵⁴

Those memoirs also hinted that there was a covert side to the Carter Doctrine in Afghanistan. Nine months before the Red Army rolled into Kabul, Brzezinski had expressed "concern over the Soviets' creeping intervention in Afghanistan" and insisted that Washington must be "more sympathetic to those Afghans who were determined to preserve their country's independence."¹⁵⁵ The Pentagon's Walter Slocombe agreed and wondered whether clandestine U.S. support for Muslim guerrillas might succeed in "sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire."¹⁵⁶ On 6 April 1979 the Special Coordination Committee, an interagency group chaired by Brzezinski, instructed the CIA to develop a comprehensive plan for a secret war in Afghanistan backed by the United States, ranging from "indirect financial assistance to the insurgents" to "weapons support." Three months later President Carter signed a finding authorizing the agency to begin helping the Afghan mujahadeen, as the Muslim rebels now called themselves, with propaganda, cash, and nonmilitary supplies. In short order Pakistani president Mohammed Zia al-Haq, whose nation shared a long and porous border with Afghanistan, put his Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) to work running guns to anti-Soviet guerrillas next door.¹⁵⁷ Thanks to this covert help from Pakistan and the United States, by December 1979 the mujahadeen stood ready to resist the Soviet takeover.¹⁵⁸

Over the next decade the Carter and Reagan administrations would funnel nearly \$3 billion into Afghanistan to help the Muslim resistance fight pro-Soviet president Babrak Karmal, his like-minded successor Mohammed Najibullah, and a 100,000-man Russian expeditionary force. By July 1980 Wash-

ington was providing the mujahadeen with everything from captured Soviet AK-47 assault rifles to Chinese rocket-propelled grenade launchers via a CIA-151 arms pipeline running through Peshawar, a Pakistani frontier town near the Khyber Pass. After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan became a hot-button campaign issue later that fall for Republicans who eventually succeeded in making Jimmy Carter a one-term president, CIA director Stansfield Turner let it be known that his agency “was pushing everything through the pipeline that the Pakistanis were willing to receive.”¹⁵⁹

Ronald Reagan and his director of central intelligence, William Casey, wasted little time devising increasingly ingenious ways to provide funds, weapons, and advice to the Afghan guerrillas. In late 1982, for example, deputy national security adviser Robert McFarlane asked Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the House of Saud’s representative in Washington, whether his government might be willing to help finance the mujahadeen’s war against the Soviets. “The Saudis understood that our interests in rolling back Marxism coincided closely with their own,” McFarlane noted long afterward, and over time they, too, would channel almost \$3 billion into the CIA’s covert crusade in Afghanistan. Among the first to put those dollars to good use against the Red Army was Osama bin Laden, a Saudi engineer in his late twenties.¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, in early 1983 the White House issued National Security Decision Directive 75, a blueprint for destabilizing “the Evil Empire” that made the Afghan war the centerpiece of what came to be known as the Reagan Doctrine. America’s principal objective in Afghanistan, the drafters of the directive emphasized, was “to keep maximum pressure on Moscow for withdrawal and to ensure that the Soviets’ political, military, and other costs remain high while the occupation continues.”¹⁶¹

As the decade wore on, the Soviets and their Afghan clients realized that they were fighting a losing battle against the mujahadeen. By 1986 the Reagan administration had infiltrated sixty U.S. Green Berets into Afghanistan, where they coordinated the flow of supplies to a guerrilla army whose ranks had swelled to 30,000 and taught the rebels how to use high-tech weapons such as shoulder-launched Stinger anti-aircraft missiles that made sitting ducks of Soviet helicopter gunships. Once the Kremlin decided to cut its losses and sued for peace three years later, it was only a matter of time before President Najibullah’s pro-Soviet regime disintegrated in April 1992. “It was the CIA’s war,” Charles Cogan, the former chief of the agency’s Middle Eastern division, observed in a recent postmortem. “There were no American military forces involved and no American soldiers killed.”¹⁶²

During the early 1990s Cogan and his colleagues downplayed the length and cost of the war in order to emphasize its success. Few would deny that Washington’s clandestine triumph in Afghanistan helped trigger the collapse of the Soviet Union or that it helped accelerate the end of the Cold War. Yet the

revelation that the Muslim terrorists who bombed New York City's World Trade Center in early 1993 and the Taliban extremists who established a bitterly anti-American Islamic republic in Kabul in late 1996 had learned their craft while helping the CIA defeat the Red Army in Afghanistan made the agency's most successful covert operation ring hollow in many ears.¹⁶³ To be sure, some Cold Warriors insisted that the "blowback" from the Afghan battlefield was a small price to pay for defeating the Kremlin. "For almost ten years, Moscow had to carry on a war . . . that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire," Zbigniew Brzezinski remarked in early 1998 when asked whether he had any regrets about having supported the mujahadeen. "What is most important in the history of the world? The Taliban or . . . the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"¹⁶⁴ For most Americans, however, the answer to this rhetorical question seemed far less obvious after 11 September 2001, when the Taliban's friend Osama bin Laden attacked New York City and Washington, than when Brzezinski first unveiled the Carter Doctrine two decades earlier.

American strategic doctrine had come full circle since the United States reluctantly began to assume Great Britain's burdens east of Suez after the Second World War. How to contain the Soviet Union and promote regional security, or more metaphorically, how to develop a Monroe Doctrine for the Middle East was a riddle that had bedeviled U.S. policymakers for more than fifty years. Preoccupied with a series of crises in Central Europe and East Asia, Harry Truman hoped to prevent fresh Kremlin encroachments in the Middle East by blending U.S. dollars with British ingenuity to launch collective security organizations such as MEC and MEDO. Once Britain's high-profile role tainted such initiatives with the scent of colonialism, Dwight Eisenhower pressed Whitehall to limit its responsibilities to the Persian Gulf and embraced a policy of unilateral U.S. military intervention to block Soviet gains elsewhere in the region. After the Eisenhower Doctrine tarred the United States itself with the brush of imperialism, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson turned toward regional proxies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia to thwart Russian-backed radicals, laying the groundwork for what became the Nixon Doctrine. When Islamic upheavals jeopardized those proxies and provoked Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Washington invoked the Carter Doctrine and stood alone against Moscow in Southwest Asia.

At one level the tale of four doctrines seemed to have ended happily, with the United States cast in Britain's role and with the Persian Gulf safely outside the Kremlin's reach. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s Jimmy Carter's successors refined his strategic approach to the Middle East. The Reagan Doctrine extended clandestine U.S. support to anti-Soviet "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan. The Powell Doctrine, perfected by George Bush and his chair-

man of the JCS in 1991, put teeth in Carter's strategy for defending the Persian Gulf. The so-called Clinton Doctrine brought Washington into the post-Cold War era with a policy of "dual containment" directed at Iran and Iraq, two rogue states that American officials identified as most likely to succeed Moscow as the chief threat to U.S. interests in the region.

By the late 1990s, however, it was clear that a fixation with combating the Soviet threat had led a generation of U.S. policymakers to neglect the appeal of revolutionary nationalism and radical Islam among the peoples of the Muslim world. Not surprisingly, while al-Qaeda was completing its plans for the 9/11 attacks during the summer of 2001, George W. Bush and the new team of advisers he brought with him to Washington were preoccupied with ballistic missile defense, Russian expansion along the northern tier, and other old questions dating from the final years of the Cold War. Osama bin Laden's assault on the American homeland was at least as big a shock for Bush's national security managers as the communist takeover in China and the Korean War had been for their predecessors half a century earlier, and they responded by calling for a global war on terror whose scope, goals, and rhetoric echoed Truman's militarization of containment with the adoption of NSC-68 during the spring of 1950. In September 2002, the Bush administration unveiled a new national security strategy designed to combat the "green threat" of Islamic terrorism by resorting to at least one tactic that Harry Truman had never been willing to use against the "red threat" of international communism—preventive war.

This new Bush Doctrine provided the strategic rationale for the American invasion of Iraq six months later and the occupation that followed. As of the autumn of 2007, the jury was still out as to whether or not "liberation" would prove more effective than "containment" in promoting and protecting U.S. interests in the Middle East. The four Cold War doctrines designed to contain international communism may have prevented Soviet expansion, but they proved largely ineffective in preventing a wave of nationalist upheavals from Egypt and Libya to Iran and Iraq that bedeviled American officials during the four decades after 1945. In "liberating" Iraq from the brutal rule of Saddam Hussein, whose secular nationalism had more in common with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab socialism than with Osama bin Laden's religious extremism, the Bush administration inadvertently created a breeding ground for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which had not existed prior to March 2003. George W. Bush, like Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy before him, was learning the hard way that in the Middle East, more often than not the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.