

H.W. BRANDS

**INTO
THE
LABYRINTH
THE
UNITED STATES
AND THE
MIDDLE EAST**

1945-1993

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I N T O T H E L A B Y R I N T H
THE UNITED STATES AND THE MIDDLE EAST
1945-1993

H. W. Brands

Professor of History
Texas A&M University

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INTO THE LABYRINTH

THE UNITED STATES AND THE MIDDLE EAST, 1945–1993

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About the Author

H. W. Brands grew up in Oregon before earning history degrees at Stanford University and the University of Texas at Austin. He has taught at the University of Texas, Vanderbilt University, and Texas A & M University. He is the author of nine books on American history and international relations. Recent titles include *The Devil We Knew: Americans and the Cold War* and *The United States in the World: A History of American International Relations*.

Foreword

“The United States always wins the war and loses the peace,” runs a persistent popular complaint. Neither part of the statement is accurate. The United States barely escaped the War of 1812 with its territory intact, and in Korea in the 1950s the nation was forced to settle for a stalemate on the battlefield. At Paris in 1782, and again in 1898, American negotiators drove hard bargains to win notable diplomatic victories. Yet the myth persists, along with the equally erroneous American belief that we are a peaceful people. Our history is studded with conflict and violence. From the Revolution to the Cold War, Americans have been willing to fight for their interests, their beliefs, and their ambitions. The United States has gone to war for many objectives—for independence in 1775, for honor and trade in 1812, for territory in 1846, for humanity and empire in 1898, for neutral rights in 1917, and for national security in 1941. Since 1945 the nation has been engaged in two wars in Asia, a relatively brief but bloody struggle in Korea, and a longer and even more tragic encounter in Vietnam. And most recently, Americans fought for both oil and the Wilsonian principle of collective security in the Persian Gulf War.

In this volume of the *America in Crisis* series, Professor H. W. Brands provides a comprehensive and balanced overview of American policy in the Middle East since 1945. Defining the region broadly, he covers both familiar topics such as the dangerous Suez crisis of 1956, the embarrassing Iranian hostage episode, and the triumphant Gulf War, as well as less well-known incidents like the Cyprus crisis and the civil war in Yemen in the 1960s. The result is a book that not only relates the Middle East to the broader issues of the Cold War but also illuminates the specific dilemmas confronting American diplomats in a strange and exotic part of the world. By bringing his account down to Desert Storm, he is able to show how even the end of the Cold War did not resolve the difficulties this region posed for American interests. The vast oil reserves of the Persian Gulf as well as the long-standing American commitment to the survival of Israel transcended

the power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. In describing the last half-century of American experience in the Middle East, Professor Brands offers insight and perspective on the issues the United States still faces in the troubled area.

Robert A. Divine

Preface

Shortly before World War II began, a writer in *Harper's* magazine surveyed American relations with the various peoples and regions of the world. Arriving at the Middle East, he declared, "Our relations with these people are not important." Several months later, an American diplomat drew an assignment to the Middle East and prepared for a boring turn of duty. An associate commiserated, saying of the area, "Nothing ever happens there." As late as 1943, an American government official who displeased President Franklin Roosevelt was exiled to Iraq, on the reasoning that he could hardly cause trouble in such an insignificant, out-of-the-way place.

Half a century later, it requires a stretch of the historical imagination to fathom such opinions. Since 1945, no portion of the planet has been at the center of more momentous events than the Middle East. Hardly a year has passed without a war somewhere in the neighborhood, without a revolution or a couple of coups, without an embargo of oil, without airplane hijackings or hostage-takings. And for much of the period from 1945 until the 1990s, every time a crisis roiled the region, the world held its breath to see how this latest nail-biter would affect the superpowers, and whether this one might be the long-feared trigger to touch off World War III.

Americans, despite their pre-1945 lack of interest in the Middle East, soon came to recognize the region's importance. World War II wrought a revolution in American foreign policy, with Pearl Harbor and its aftermath thoroughly discrediting the isolationists who had kept the United States on the sidelines of world affairs during the 1930s. By 1945, most Americans, and nearly all American policy makers, believed that the United States must take an active part in keeping the peace in areas previously beyond the pale of official American concern. The Middle East, where peace chronically needed keeping, was one of those areas.

Three factors, in particular, drew American attention to the Middle East: oil, the Soviet Union, and Israel. Oil preoccupied American policy makers during the decades after 1945, for the reason that

American petroleum demand, and that of the United States' allies, outstripped Western petroleum production. The Middle East was the world's largest source of exportable oil; therefore, the Middle East was vital to the prosperity and security of the Western alliance. World oil prices jumped with every jolt to the Middle Eastern status quo; each jump threatened the United States and its trading partners with inflation, recession, or both. The mere thought of a cutoff of Middle Eastern oil gave American leaders nightmares. Although the United States might survive a petroleum blockade, relying on its own resources and alternative suppliers, the Europeans and Japanese, both of whom were more dependent on Middle Eastern oil than the United States, would be terribly tempted to come to terms with the blockaders. What such temptations might do to the Western alliance was anyone's guess. None of the guesses afforded encouragement.

If oil preoccupied American leaders, the Soviet Union—the second cause of American interest in the Middle East—obsessed them. From the late 1940s until the late 1980s, Americans worried about the Soviet Union more than they have ever worried about any other foreign foe. And with good cause: never has any other country possessed the power to wipe out American civilization within a matter of hours. In reality, few American leaders expected a bolt from the blue; instead, they feared a gradual expansion of Soviet influence in regions that mattered to the welfare of the West—regions such as the Middle East. For four decades after World War II, American officials worked strenuously to keep the Soviets out of the Middle East. Washington never succeeded entirely, but each advance by the Kremlin simply caused American leaders to work all the harder. Not until the self-liquidation of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s did American leaders allow themselves to relax.

Concerns about oil and the Soviet Union pulled Americans in the same direction: stymieing Soviet adventurism in the Middle East helped guarantee Western access to oil, while Middle Eastern oil helped guarantee the Western economic, military, and political power that stymied Soviet adventurism. By contrast, the third factor that made the Middle East so important to Americans—Israel—pulled them in the opposite direction. Nearly all the oil of the Middle East lay beneath the soil of Israel's enemies; by supporting Israel, the United States tended to alienate the West's oil suppliers. Likewise, by backing the Israelis, Washington encouraged several of Israel's enemies to look to Moscow for support. Nonetheless, the American peo-

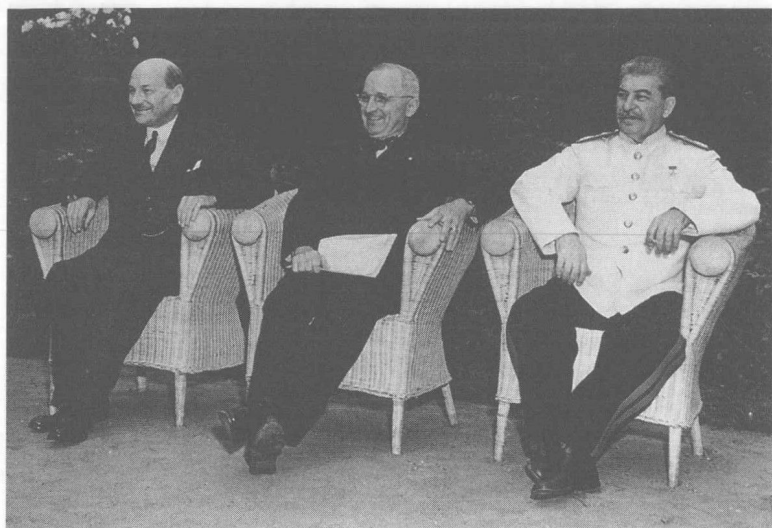
ple and the administrations of nine American presidents (if not always the State Department and other Washington bureaus) consistently judged the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine worthy of American assistance. Sometimes the assistance took diplomatic and political form; sometimes it came in the harder currency of dollars and weapons. But it rarely faltered, and never for long.

These three factors—oil, the Soviet Union, and Israel—as well as some lesser concerns, propelled the United States into the affairs of the Middle East to an extent most Americans of the pre-1945 era could hardly have imagined. American involvement didn't happen all at once; it developed over nearly half a century. Nor did it happen according to any preconceived plan. To a greater extent than American dealings with some other parts of the world, American relations with the Middle East were frequently reactive, consisting of ad hoc responses to regional crises. The three strongest influences on American policies—oil, the Soviet Union, and Israel—were simply that: influences. They disposed Americans to act in certain ways, but they didn't entirely determine American actions. Coming to grips with the Middle East defied easy formulas.

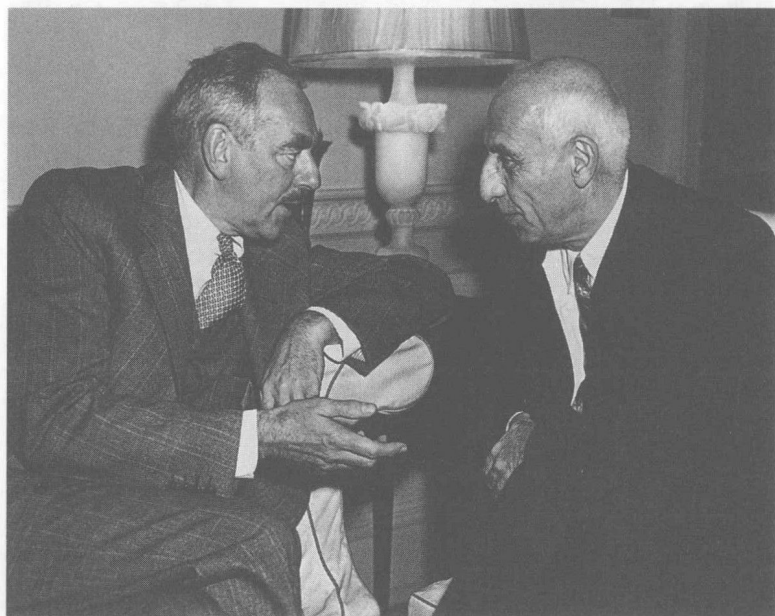
By whatever means accomplished, the cumulative change in American relations with the Middle East was breathtaking. In 1945, it never would have occurred to an American president to send 500,000 American soldiers to settle a dispute between two Arab countries, and the American public never would have supported a president who hatched such a crazy scheme. In the early 1990s, not only could an American president order a half million troops to war in the Persian Gulf, but the American public enthusiastically approved his decision to do so. How and why this great change took place is the subject of what follows.

I would like to thank Robert Divine for suggesting the topic of this book, and for commenting on an early version of the manuscript. Nathan Brown, George Washington University, and Howard Jones, University of Alabama, likewise offered valuable suggestions for improvements. Peter Labella, Laura Warner, and the staff at McGraw-Hill made the production process a pleasure.

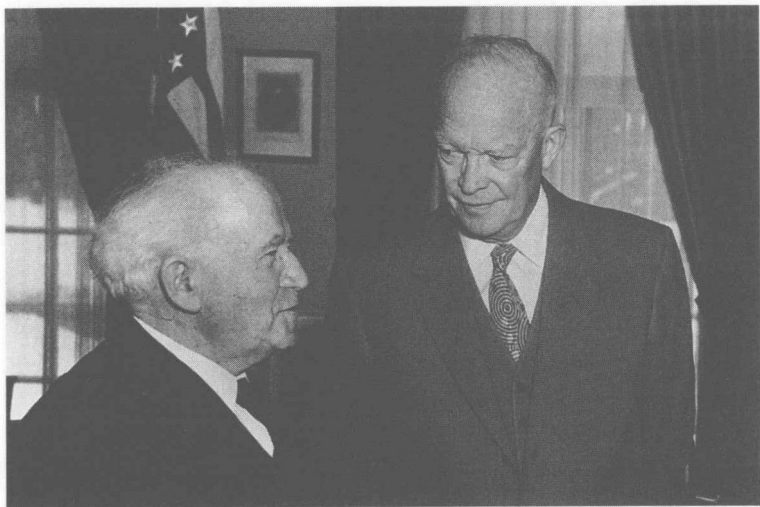
H. W. Brands



Clement Attlee of Britain, Harry Truman of the United States, and Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union at the Potsdam conference, August 1945. (*Truman Library/U.S. Army*)



American Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq during the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute. (*Truman Library/U.S. Department of State*)



David Ben Gurion of Israel and Dwight Eisenhower in Washington.
(Eisenhower Library/National Park Service)



Eisenhower and Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, September 1960. (Eisenhower Library/Nat Fein: New York Herald Tribune)



John Kennedy and then Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir, September 1961. (*Kennedy Library*)



Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and Lyndon Johnson after the June War of 1967. (*Johnson Library*)



Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Jimmy Carter of the United States, and Menachem Begin of Israel at the Camp David conference. (*Carter Library*)



Carter and the Shah of Iran in Washington. (*Carter Library*)

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Chapter 1

First Entanglements: 1945–1948

1. IN THE BEGINNING

Before World War II, the Middle East was about as far away conceptually from the United States as it was possible for an inhabited, civilized region to be. Americans were relatively familiar with East Asia: for a century and a half, American traders had plied the Pacific routes, and for a shorter but not insignificant period, American missionaries had struggled to stem the Niagara of heathen souls plunging from China into the eternal abyss. Americans knew less of India but still something: the transcendentalists of the nineteenth century had fostered a vogue for Indian religions and philosophy. American impressions of Africa were often wrong, but the existence in the United States of several million souls of African descent kept the idea of Africa alive.

American connections to the Middle East were more tenuous. Early explorers of North America had harbored fuzzy notions about discovering the lost tribes of Israel in the American wilderness; Puritans and other empire-of-the-soul builders spoke of raising a new Jerusalem on the Atlantic's western shore; the great majority of Americans who were Christians considered Jesus' homeland holy. But the lost Israelites were never found; the new-Jerusalem language was chiefly allegorical; and not since the Crusades had many Christians thought of the Holy Land as a place they might actually visit. Although American Jews took the idea of Jerusalem more seriously, before the end of the nineteenth century they were only a handful, and, existing in an overwhelmingly Christian and often antisemitic culture, their views carried little weight in American society as a whole.