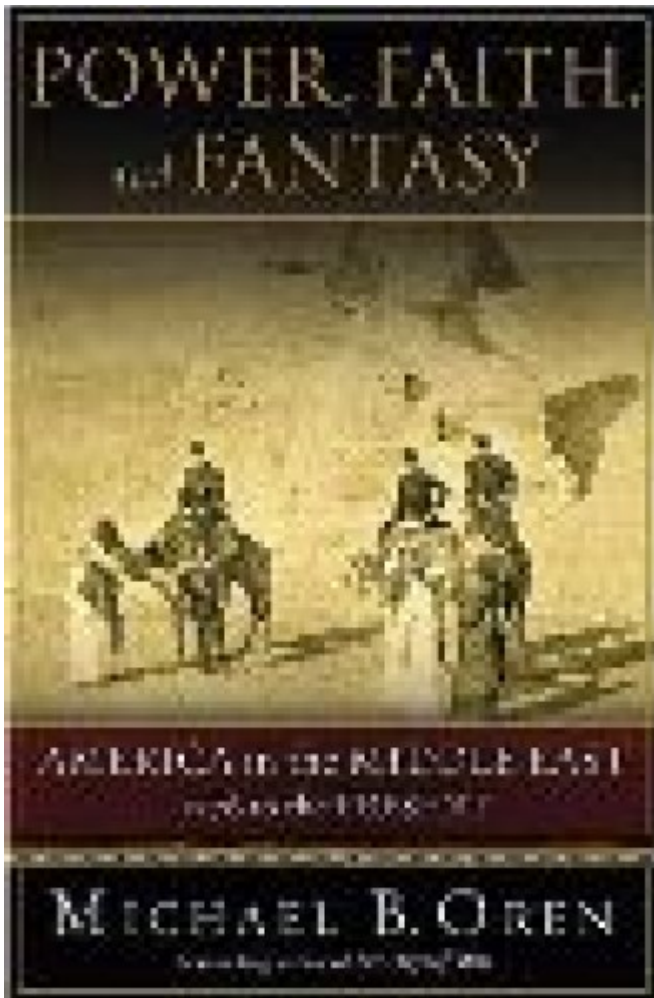


Power, Faith, and Fantasy

reviewed by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present

Michael B. Oren
Norton

Prior to the Allied campaign in North Africa, GIs were issued handbooks designed to prepare them for the strange new lands in which they would fight: "Don't refer to the people as heathen, they are very religious. Never stare at a Moslem woman." As he prepared for the 1942 invasion, General George Patton was aware that he was retracing the path of American troops who had fought against Barbary pirates. His invasion fleet included the USS *Philadelphia*, named for a U.S. frigate captured by the Moroccan navy in 1803, retitled *The Gift of Allah* by its captors, then destroyed in a daring raid by Stephen Decatur.

Michael Oren, who has written on the modern Middle East and on the Six-Day War and its aftermath, offers a dizzying tour of American relations with the Mediterranean Muslim world, primarily during the two centuries prior to the formation of Israel. It is a story full of colorful characters and incidents, and a bracing reminder of the changing and complex currents in this history.

Though there is a widespread impression that the U.S. engagement with the Muslim world is a recent development, Oren shows that this engagement is longstanding and is deeply woven into our national identity. Images of Americans languishing as prisoners or slaves in Muslim lands figured as dramatically in 18th-century American consciousness as images of the hostages in Iran did in the late 20th century. Among the nation's earliest consulates were those established in North Africa, and the U.S. decision to become a trading and military sea power was forged through its contacts with the coastal Muslim states.

The dots that Oren selects from a vast chronological canvas connect in a fascinating way. From Thomas Jefferson's decision to build a navy to Robert Kennedy's assassination by a deranged Palestinian on the first anniversary of the Six-Day War, from Mark Twain's humorous accounts of his adventures in the Holy Land to the enlistment of former Union and Confederate generals to serve together building a modern army for the king of Egypt, from *Ben Hur* author Lew Wallace's service as U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire to Woodrow Wilson's role in the achievement of independence by Syria and Lebanon, the tableau of U.S. history reveals the Middle East appearing unobtrusively close to center stage.

As the title suggests, this story explores America's political and economic engagement with the region, its spiritual engagement with the land of the Bible, and its subjective response to the literary images of an exotic East. On the latter score,

Oren gives a vivid picture of the Middle Eastern pavilions at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago—the most popular (and profitable) attractions of the fair. They included a replica of a mosque and re-creations of a street in Cairo and a village in Algeria, complete with camels and monkeys. In the “Mohammedan world” section was a Persian tent with a palace of eros, where the prime attraction was belly dancers; the exposition’s legendary “Little Egypt” became a household word for lascivious enticement.

For much of the period Oren describes—the time before any oil wells had been drilled—the U.S. footprint in the Middle East was shallow compared to those of the European colonial powers and the Ottoman Empire. But a steady stream of idiosyncratic American characters paid a visit. An overweight, bespectacled professor from Union Seminary in New York, Edward Robinson, proved hardier than most explorers and founded the modern discipline of biblical archaeology. Harriet Livermore, a revivalist preacher, singer and novelist, traveled to Jerusalem to establish a colony for returning Jews. Indeed, restoration of Jews to the Holy Land was a passion that sprang up in evangelical churches and spread to other segments of American Christianity.

The restorationist schemes did not bring about anything substantive. The missionary movement in the Middle East, however, built educational and social institutions of the first rank that nurtured Arab nationalism, though the movement had minimal success in converting Muslims. The deep connections that developed led missionaries, on the whole, to be anti-Zionist and to counsel the U.S. government to be likewise. This perspective was mirrored in the State Department, which was itself heavily populated with people from missionary families.

Contemporary discussion of the Middle East is dominated by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the one hand and Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism on the other. Oren’s brief sections on this part of the story feel a bit tacked on, and we come upon them with a slightly startled familiarity, not accustomed to arriving at these issues by way of U.S. history. That path, alas, leads to no magical insight for our times, but following it lends depth and distance to our vision.