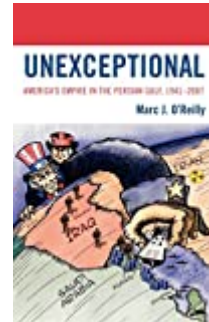


Marc J. O'Reilly. *Unexceptional: America's Empire in the Persian Gulf, 1941-2007.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008. xxi + 345 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0590-0.



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Mis-Titled But Insightful

With the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq in 2003, observers and pundits have offered various categories to classify the latest adventure of the United States in the Middle East. Supporters of the invasion have argued that the George W. Bush administration's actions in the Middle East are simply another installment of America's benevolent but heavy-handed involvement in the Persian Gulf. Realist observers protested the overtly ideological nature of the war and disregard for realpolitik principles. Critics on the left (and some self-proclaimed neoconservatives on the right) argued that the latest Iraq war was beyond a mere hegemonic act but instead constituted a textbook example of imperialist behavior. In *Unexceptional*, Marc J. O'Reilly has crafted a welcome addition to the current debate on the nature of U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf while also providing new insights into American Middle East policy since World War II.

O'Reilly, an assistant professor of political science at Heidelberg College in Ohio, argues that America's involvement in the Persian Gulf was and remains similar

to previous empires' involvement in the region. Fully aware of the implications employing 'empire' as an analytical tool, O'Reilly introduces the book with a survey on the contemporary debate on the definition of "empire," including a range of views from Niall Ferguson to Immanuel Wallerstein. O'Reilly tackles the taxonomists' preferred alternative to "empire"—"hegemony"—by arguing that the two terms are meant to diagnose different ailments. The term "hegemony" implies that a state possesses a high level of cultural, economic, and political power, and then uses this power to coerce or encourage other states to bend to the will of the state. O'Reilly cites President Bill Clinton's bailout of Mexico in 1994 and the stabilization of the world economy in the wake of the Asian financial panic of 1997-98 as hegemonic acts. Contemporaneously, Washington unleashed multiple waves of air strikes against Iraq, which prompts O'Reilly to ask: "Why would a hegemon employ what could only be construed as imperial methods?" (p. 23)? This question gets to the heart of O'Reilly's project: his goal is not to examine the essence of America's preeminent role in the

world but to find an adequate framework and characterization for interpreting the aims and actions of America's involvement in the Middle East.

The bulk of O'Reilly's project consists of examining discrete episodes of larger periods of U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf, and then placing those episodes into a framework that explains how empires act. O'Reilly offers five propositions for how the United States has exercised imperialism in the Persian Gulf, taking into account whether America's interests are at stake, and whether the United States itself, or an ally, can act to protect those interests. The first episode occurred during World War II, when the United States supplanted Great Britain in Iran and Saudi Arabia as the protector of the support line that shipped weapons and materiel to the Allies. The United States sought to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran to counter Great-Power threats [from the Soviets], a favorite imperial tactic (p. 57). U.S. encroachment increased when Britain's empire declined, and thus the United States, the superpower with atomic weapons and the most productive economy in the world, officially joined the Great Game (p. 56). The replacement of Britain's role by the United States in Saudi Arabia and Iran as British power waned bolsters O'Reilly's thesis. This trend intensified in O'Reilly's second period, 1948-58, when British power declined precipitously in the wake of the Suez crisis and the United States responded with the Eisenhower Doctrine, which declared that the United States would be concerned with the internal politics of all Middle Eastern states. U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1958, as intended, demonstrated to the Middle East that the United States would act on its promises, as if the ultimate imperial act (the covert overthrow of Mohammed Mossadeq in 1954) was not enough.

In examining the third stage of American expansion, from 1959-72, O'Reilly acknowledges that it defies easy explanation (p. 116). With the Vietnam War the central issue in U.S. foreign policy, involvement in the Middle East, declined. However, O'Reilly offers a convincing explanation for this seemingly anomalous behavior: with a military bogged down in Vietnam, the United States relied on its close relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran to protect its interests, known as the Twin Pillars strategy. The central interest of the United States—unfettered access to oil—remained safeguarded despite the turbulence of the Six Days' War, the Yemeni civil war, and border skirmishes between Iraq and Kuwait. The United States was more concerned with limiting the negative effects of these conflicts than with preventing them.

The detached role of the United States in the Middle East continues into O'Reilly's fourth stage of analysis, from 1973-89. O'Reilly admits that calling the American performance in this era imperialistic would seem rather preposterous, but an informal empire ... allows for the contraction of interests and influence (p. 155). O'Reilly rescues his thesis by arguing that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's success in convincing the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to abandon its oil embargo further insinuated the United States into the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the inaction of President Jimmy Carter as he watched the Iranian shah fall and the Twin Pillars strategy crumble weakens O'Reilly's argument. Nevertheless, O'Reilly argues that Carter's inaction was consonant with imperialism. He writes that inaction was due to a lack of "decisive presidential leadership" (not a lack of will), and that "in contrast, a Truman, Eisenhower, or Nixon might have ordered some kind of action" to save the shah (p. 156). This exercise demonstrates that O'Reilly's minimum criteria for an imperial act includes nonactions—just as long as the idleness is driven by a reliance on proxies or ineffective government. Moreover, this means that O'Reilly's functional definition of "empire" is primarily concerned with the intentions or even desires of the purportedly imperial state. While his definition proves adequate for most of the examples that O'Reilly examines, his characterization of the detached role of the United States as the shah fell as imperialistic will prove problematic for some readers.

The heart of *Unexceptional* lies in O'Reilly's largest and most incisive chapter, which retells the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan through the lens of his interpretative framework on imperialism. O'Reilly argues that U.S. post-9/11 policy transformed from an informal empire to a formal empire, largely due to the American public's acquiescence to indefinitely deploying U.S. troops into foreign lands. This acquiescence was the result of the public's post-9/11 tolerance of the costs of occupation of foreign land—the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror provided a cover for the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, or formal empire. This, in conjunction with the significant military superiority of the United States, allowed the Bush administration to jettison the favored tactic of the United States in the region—reliance on proxies—for invasion and occupation. O'Reilly rightfully notes that the United States created the archetypal imperial dilemma in Iraq—the occupation inevitably fuels resentment and reprisals by the occupied, yet the occupied cannot risk abandoning the occupation to a failed

stateâ (p. 241). As expected, OâReillyâs thesis that U.S. policies in the Middle East are imperial is most convincing when U.S. policy shifted from informal to formal empire.

Ultimately, the central flaw in *Unexceptional* resides in the disconnect between the stated aims of the book and its contents. In the introduction, OâReilly writes that, âabove all else,â his goal is to “answer one question: Is the American empire in the Persian Gulf exceptional? In other words, is American behavior different from that of previous Gulf imperialists” (p. 26)? To answer this important question, he would had to have undertaken a comparative study of British, Ottoman, and U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf. Yet, OâReillyâs book is not a comparative study—it lays out a framework for interpreting U.S. actions in the Middle East as imperialistic, and then examines discrete episodes of U.S. involvement (and sometimes non-involvement) in reference to that framework. In that sense, the work is an enlightening and welcome addition to the debate on the imperial status of postwar U.S. foreign policy. However, OâReilly simply does not address the question he lays out in the introduction. He includes only a handful of mentions of British involvement in the Middle East throughout the text, and his references to Ottoman involvement are even rarer. The reader looking for even a cursory answer to OâReillyâs central inquiry will surely be disappointed.

There are other flaws. For no obvious reason, OâReilly confines significant discussion of the relationship between the United States and Israel to the latter two chapters, ranging from 1990 to the present. OâReilly offers no explanation for why Israel suddenly appears in his analysis, which is especially odd when the incorporation of the formation of the special relationship around 1958 could bolster his overall thesis. Also, only U.S.-based, English language sources (albeit extensively researched ones) are used. Primary sources in Arabic could have shed some light on the effects, rather than just the intentions or goals, of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Despite its flaws, *Unexceptional* will be of interest to those concerned with the current debate on U.S. imperial status and those interested in examining the continuity between past U.S. actions in the Persian Gulf and the current Iraq war. The latter theme is where OâReillyâs project succeeds. OâReilly presents a convincing case that âempire and imperialism can explain the U.S. rise to prominence in the Gulf since 1941 as well as the evolution of American policy and strategy in that regionâ (p. 5).

The overt and formal imperialism of the current Iraq war has clearly inspired OâReilly to reevaluate past U.S. involvement in the region. Ultimately, *Unexceptional* succeeds because the interpretive framework is both relevant to contemporary debates and a provider of new insights into past U.S. actions without being marred by presentism.

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