

# East of Suez

ARABIA, THE GULF, AND THE WEST. *By J. B. Kelly.* (Basic Books, New York, 1980)

Students of old maps know the keen pleasure to be derived from the antique toponyms that ingenious or bored cartographers in Venice and Amsterdam and Lyons used to assign to distant bits of *terra incognita*. We rightly permit ourselves to savor those names — Estotiland and Quivira, Norumbega and the Straits of Anian — just as we can relish Elizabethan stories of fabulous beasts beyond the seas and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders. The poetry of these archaic placenames is heightened, rather than diminished, when viewed through the mist of misinformation.

But dreamy misinformation is *not* permissible when it serves as the basis for foreign policy in matters affecting the very survival of the industrialized West. There are few things that matter as much as what happens to the oil that lies in and around the Persian Gulf. Yet the men who have been making our policy for the Gulf — here and in the chancelleries of Western Europe — do so in virtually impenetrable atmosphere of myth, cliché, and received idea, of “impressions” brought back from a quick trip to one of the Gulf states (usually Saudi Arabia) by gullible journalists, congressmen, and military men, of groundless epithets repeated incessantly by an army of publicists working on behalf of the Saudis and their friends. That is why *The New York Times*, for example, can unembarrassedly inform its readers that “we need Saudi goodwill” (actually we need nothing of the kind — we need Saudi cooperation, which is a different thing), or why the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia can suavely refer on national television to U.S.-Saudi relations as being characterized by “good faith, good friendship, and what I call that special relationship” (all three being figments of the American imagination, if the evidence is examined), or why the Carter Administration believed it had to beg the Saudis to allow us to maintain our Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Nor should we forget the insistence that Islam and Marxism are incompatible, or that the Arab oil states feel a natural benevolence toward the Christian West, marred only — so we are endlessly told — by that little affair in Western Palestine. Having exhaustively studied the relevant testimony before Congress on the Gulf (a feat requiring enormous stamina), J.B. Kelly provides a harsh taxonomy of American authorities. There are the employees of the State and Defense Departments, loyally pushing the latest party line. There are representatives “of the oil industry and other commercial undertakings,” and finally, there are “instant experts, bright young men on the make, programmed with the fashionable ideas and jargon of the day.” In the spirit of those venerable mapmakers, these assorted “experts” confidently wield distant place names in the full assurance that no one will call their collective bluff:

To read these transcripts (of congressional testimony) is to enter a

strange world from which reality has been resolutely banished, a world where ectoplasmic shapes variously labelled "Persia" (or "Iran"), "Saudi Arabia," "Kuwait," "Oman," and so forth are solemnly and interminably described by a shuffling, endless procession of sages, oracles, sophists, and sciolists, with all the perspicuity of an Arabian Bedouin discussing the finer points of the United States Constitution . . .

It is to these "ectoplasmic shapes," the airy nothings of ignorant "authorities," that Professor Kelly meticulously gives local habitations and names. No one else possesses his qualifications for this task; no one else knows so well such various and yet such relevant matter: the British withdrawal from Aden and from the Gulf, and the political climate that made it possible, the Marxist rebellion in Aden, the tribal revolt in Dhofar (encouraged, incidentally, by the "pro-Western" Saudis as a way of dealing a blow to their ancient enemy Oman — a point that needs to be made in light of official Washington's touching faith in the harmony believed to reign among the countries of the Arabian Peninsula), the indispensable roles of Wahhabi Islam and of ARAMCO as the two pillars of modern Saudi Arabia, the grotesque "carnival" of consumption in the littoral sheikhdoms, the surquidry and swank of the late Shah, the vanity of the Persians, the artificial nature of Iraq, the manipulation of the southern Arabs by the northern Arab emigres, the elements that make up the Arab-OPEC lobby in the West that have contributed so significantly to the unnecessary power of OPEC, the useless and self-defeating Western appeasement of the oil states, the fantastic arms buildup in the Gulf, the "nerveless acquiescence" of the West toward the "latter-day bashas and beglerbegs, amirs and pashas" of the Gulf that is part of a more general failure of nerve toward the nations of Asia and Africa, and more.

Of course, J. B. Kelly has had a head start. He has been studying the Gulf for more than twenty-five years, while not a few of our policymakers discovered the area only when the Shah came tumbling down. Professor Kelly has travelled extensively up and down the Gulf, has lived and taught in the Arab world, and for a time even served as the political advisor to Sheik Zayid of Abu Dhabi. Both in London and in the Gulf, he knows the cast of characters, the charlatans and crooks and also the honest men. Somehow he has remained immune to that occupational disease that afflicts so many Western diplomats, the *furor arabicus* that leads to a total identification with the Arab cause, not only vis-a-vis Israel, but even more tellingly, in the matter of oil. (At least one of the examples Professor Kelly cites, that of the shadowy James Akins, would appear to merit more formal investigation.)

This long and easy intimacy with the men and events that are his subject matter is happily expressed by a brilliant prose style. The author is chaste and sober when the material calls for it, particularly in the early chapters on Aden and Dhofar, on the Buraimi oasis dispute, and on the detailed chronicling of OPEC's rise. Enormous amounts of research lie behind this book, demurely hinted at in the bibliography, but there is no ostentatious bristle of footnotes. The book is thick with fact, but those facts are quietly enrolled in a narrative that manages to make thrilling the most unlikely material.

One of Professor Kelly's most important lessons is very simple: before discussing the peoples and nations of the Persian Gulf, one must *know* the Persian Gulf. That simple lesson, of course, would stop up the mouths of almost all of those now brightly pontificating – in the press, in the Pentagon, in the State Department, and at the National Security Council – about such matters. The inhibitions that rightly prevent people from descanting on Greek prosody or elementary particle theory are thrown off when “current events” are the subject, so that anyone may now discuss the ancient roots of Arab-Persian hostility, or the exact nature of Sunni and Shia Islam. Professor Kelly tells us what we need to know, and we need to know all sorts of things: about the courtiers flattering Sheikh Zayid, about the pathetic National Museum in Qatar, about the strategic significance of Aden and Oman, about the rival tribes within Saudi Arabia, about the Ibadi branch of Islam peculiar to the Omanis, about the *ikhwan*, about the “street” so quickly summoned by the urban Arab politician, about the 1001 subversive groups in the Gulf, about the historic animus of the Muslim East to the Christian West, about the exultant sense of power, and simultaneous resentment and fear, that makes so many of the people of the Gulf into hybrids, half-Caliban and half-Tamburlaine – all of this gives some indication of the rich variety of the book. There really is no substitute for a solid grounding in detail. What Nobokov once wrote in regard to his work on Pushkin applies equally to studies of contemporary politics:

... unless these (details) are thoroughly understood and remembered, all “general ideas” (so easily acquired, so profitably resold) must necessarily remain but worn passports allowing their bearers short cuts from one area of ignorance to another.

Professor Kelly writes, when particularly outraged, like an angel of vengeance, seraphically smiting a confederacy of dunces, frauds, and unregistered foreign agents. Here, for example, is part of his description of the efforts of H. St. John Philby (Arabist and father of the celebrated traitor), whose early efforts to make palatable to the West the fanatic Wahhabi regime in Saudi Arabia stood ARAMCO propagandists in good stead as a model:

It was also due in some measure to Philby's example that ARAMCO adopted a particular literary style and imagery, the better to express the spirit and substance of its teachings. For all his vilification of his native land, Philby never completely lost his Englishness or erased the mark of his early years at Westminster and Cambridge. Consciously or unconsciously, he wrote primarily for an English readership, and his literary style, though highly idiosyncratic, reflected this fact. It reached its efflorescence in his *Saudi Arabia*, which was studded with phrases of the order of “the barony of Dariya,” “the sturdy yeomen of Najd” and “grave Wahhabi prelates,” all of which tended to convey a picture of some sun-baked Plantagenet England.

And here is Professor Kelly painting the royal progress through Europe in 1974 of the ever-preposterous Yamani and his travelling companion, Algerian oil minister Abdessalem:

The press and the luminaries of television and radio hung upon their slightest word, their most inadvertent aside or subtlest inflexion, even the occasional weighty pause – all of which were

breathlessly transmitted, with instantaneous oracular embellishments, to the anxious masses, mute and perplexed spectators of the hubbub and the feting. It was a spectacle worthy to be captured on a vast and crowded canvas in the style of Tiepolo, depicting a throng of gorgeously attired dignitaries all pressing forward with beseeching gestures towards two proud figures standing sternly aloof, the whole tableau perhaps to be grandly entitled "The Plenipotentiaries of Arabia and Mauretania receiving the submission of Britain and Gaul."

These passages are not incidental felicities. The book overflows with memorable sentences, paragraphs, and perfect little essays, such as the pages Professor Kelly devotes to the corrupting "contagion" of Arab and Persian oil money in the West, or his remarks on the mad policy of piling arms up in the Gulf which has created "an explosive situation of potentially nightmarish proportions," an arms buildup that is the result of a "policy — if one can dignify it with the name — of unbelievable foolishness, culpable irresponsibility, and added opportunism . . . pandering to the passion of the local governments for the deadly and costly trinkets of war." Professor Kelly predicts that these massive arsenals can only result in great harm to Western interests in the Gulf:

It is evident from even the most cursory glance that these extensive and elaborate armaments either will be used in the future in conflicts among the Gulf states, or they will be left to deteriorate into huge piles of expensive junk, a fitting commemoration of one of the greatest acts of pecuniary folly in the history of the Middle East. Given the past record and ingrained disposition of the governments and peoples of the Gulf, the former eventuality is the more likely, and the destruction that will result will be on a scale never before experienced in the Gulf. For several reasons, among them the relative paucity of alternative worthwhile targets for bomber aircraft, oil installations and port facilities are bound to suffer heavy damage.

Professor Kelly's manuscript was completed in June 1979. If you seek proof for what he says, look around.

And it is not only the Iran-Iraq war that confirms the truth of his analysis. He analyzes the gains made by the Soviet Union over the past two decades in its designs on the Gulf, designs so obvious to Professor Kelly that he is baffled that anyone should think otherwise (but even today there are those who claim the Soviet Union is simply worried about Muslim revolt in Central Asia, and is acting to "protect" its own security). As if on cue, the Red Army has moved into Afghanistan, one more confirming footnote.

And Professor Kelly is bold enough to make predictions, as well, about the future demands of OPEC. He foresees further attempts to control downstream activities, a demand that the lifting of crude be linked to purchase of locally refined products and use of locally-owned shipping, and an attempt to register the ultimate destination of the oil. Some of these predictions are already coming to pass, to judge by recent demands by that OPEC bellwether, Kuwait.

When scientists construct a hypothesis, a model that explains existing

data, they test the truth of that model against new facts, new data. Can those new facts be accommodated by the theory, or not? It is no different with political or economic analyses. On every count, events of the past year, in Tehran and Mecca; in Khorramshahr and Baghdad, in Kabul and Moscow and Islamabad, in OPEC meetings and on the streets of London and Paris, in the Billy Carter scandal and in the Carter Administration's refusal to fill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, have served to prove Professor Kelly right, virtually down to the last jot and tittle of his text. Seldom has an author been confirmed in his observations with such violence.

Professor Kelly offers us the history of Saudi Arabia, a history marked by violence and duplicity. He shows us how Saudi expansion has involved a bullying of its smaller neighbors, such as Abu Dhabi (the Buraimi oasis dispute) and Oman (the Saudi backing of the Dhofar rebellion). To his considerable evidence, the reader is tempted to add what we have learned within the past year: about Saudi interference with our arms shipments to North Yemen, about the necessity for pressuring the Saudis into a public admission that Americans were *not* behind the Mecca takeover (and this at a time when American lives were at stake all over the Muslim world), about the Saudi attempt to cripple our Strategic Petroleum Reserve, so as to increase the likelihood of panic buying and a rise in price; about the Saudi call for a *jihad* against Israel (so quickly and so soothingly glossed by the State Department, ever ready to explain away what does not accord with the Official Portrait of Saudi Arabia); about Saudi support for Iraq's attack on Iran; about Saudi manipulation of production and pricing that has been responsible for the largest increase in oil prices ever, including several price rises *after* the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (so much for solidarity with an economically debilitated West).

Professor Kelly deplores the ignorance and gullibility of Western policymakers, who appear not to understand just how much the vulnerable and threatened Saudis need us. Recent events, again, bear him out. Consider that it took more than two full weeks, and foreign technical assistance, for the Saudis finally to quell the Mecca siege. Or that American AWACS are now protecting the Saudis, terrified of a weakened Iran lashing out. Or that the Soviet Union is tightening its noose around the Gulf, in Ethiopia, in South Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and among the PLO cadres. But still we are led to believe, on the basis of nothing at all, that *we* must be thinking of ways to placate the Saudis. This "nerveless acquiescence," supported by a powerful Saudi lobby indifferent to the interests of the West, in the end may devastate the Saudis as well as the consuming nations. The Saudis have been allowed to believe that no matter what economic damage they do to the West, or what limits they place on our conventional forces in the area, we will always be there to protect, not only the oil, but their regime. So they do not care if they make our task more difficult, dangerous, and expensive. It is time, Professor Kelly believes, for the Saudis to be disabused of such notions, and time to face the need to project Western power:

The dismal spectacle of the Gulf arms extravaganza is a reflection of the utter bankruptcy of Western policy in the region since the departure of the British in 1971. In place of a coherent strategy to

safeguard the vital economic interests of the West there is only a pathetic reliance upon the doctrine of common interest to achieve the same purpose.

In analyzing the putative oil weapon, Professor Kelly shows the 1973-74 "oil embargo" as a fraud. But he stresses that the non-existence of the "oil weapon" does not permit the West to adopt an attitude of languid indifference. It is the sheer irrationality that has characterized so much of the behavior of the Muslim oil states that worries the author most. Though we have provided them with the wherewithal to destroy each other's oil installations, they are completely incapable of protecting their own installations from one another, from internal subversion, or from the Soviet Union. Only the West can do that job, and Western governments are afraid to take the steps that are absolutely essential — purely as a matter of self-preservation. Quite unnecessary fear of offending the Saudis, an other oil states, is paralyzing Western power. Professor Kelly believes such paralysis must end at once if disaster in the Gulf is to be avoided.

This bleak analysis of the "poverty of resource and invention underlying the reigning Western consensus of opinion on the subject of continued Western access to the Gulf's oil" proves to be strangely tonic and bracing. The reader who wishes to spare himself further bamboozlement by the likes of Sheikh Yamani should attend to this book. It is a powerful antidote to the current epidemic of pseudodoxy. Despite Professor Kelly, of course, there will continue to be sporadic outbreaks of the disease. Newsweeklies may still write rapturously of our friends in the Gulf. Glossy supplements may continue to show us Saudi rulers relaxing in their Stately Homes, or discharging the responsibilities of rule. And T. E. Lawrence never dies, so that Rousseau's noble savage transplanted to the Empty Quarter, the Bedouin with hawk on hand embodying austere desert verities no Westerner can aspire to, will still be a staple of the popular press. But Professor Kelly's massive work has knocked over so many of the props, ripped down the backdrop, torn up the stale script, so that it is doubtful that serious discussion about the Gulf and the West will ever return to its status quo *ante* J. B. Kelly. *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West* is a dazzling and incomparable work.

Peter Lubin

## Short Shrift

Donald Lambro

*Fat City: How Washington Wastes Your Taxes* (Regnery/Gateway, South Bend, Ind.) 1980.

In this fabulous panoply of government waste, UPI correspondent Donald Lambro continues the work of his first book, *The Federal Rat-Hole*, and delves into the budgetary equivalent of those dark places behind the kitchen stove to come up with some amazing things.

Your tax dollars might have been used to finance the Smithsonian's "Anatomical and Ecological Study of the Indian Whistling Duck."