

Power and Peril: America's Supremacy and Its Limits --- Column One: A Historian's Doctrine On Islam Steers U.S. In Fighting Terrorism --- Bernard Lewis's Prescription -- Sowing Arab Democracy -- Faces a Test in Iraq --- Two Choices: 'Get Tough or Get Out'

By Peter Waldman

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[Fourth in a Series]

Bernard Lewis often tells audiences about an encounter he once had in Jordan. The Princeton University historian, author of more than 20 books on Islam and the Middle East, says he was chatting with Arab friends in Amman when one of them trotted out an argument familiar in that part of the world.

"We have time, we can wait," he quotes the Jordanian as saying. "We got rid of the Crusaders. We got rid of the Turks. We'll get rid of the Jews."

Hearing this claim "one too many times," Mr. Lewis says, he politely shot back, "Excuse me, but you've got your history wrong. The Turks got rid of the Crusaders. The British got rid of the Turks. The Jews got rid of the British. I wonder who is coming here next."

The vignette, recounted in the 87-year-old scholar's native British accent, always garners laughs. Yet he tells it to underscore a serious point. Most Islamic countries have failed miserably at modernizing their societies, he contends, beckoning outsiders -- this time, Americans -- to intervene.

Call it the Lewis Doctrine. Though never debated in Congress or sanctified by presidential decree, Mr. Lewis's diagnosis of the Muslim world's malaise, and his call for a U.S. military invasion to seed democracy in the Mideast, have helped define the boldest shift in U.S. foreign policy in 50 years. The occupation of Iraq is putting the doctrine to the test.

For much of the second half of the last century, America viewed the Mideast and the rest of the world through a prism shaped by George Kennan, author of the doctrine of "containment." In a celebrated 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs* focused on the Soviet Union, Mr. Kennan gave structure to U.S. policy in the Cold War. It placed the need to contain Soviet ambitions above all else.

Terrorism has replaced Moscow as the global foe. And now America, having outlasted the Soviets to become the sole superpower, no longer seeks to contain but to confront, defeat and transform. How successful it is at remolding Iraq and the rest of the Mideast could have a huge impact on what sort of superpower America will be for decades to come: bold and assertive -- or inward, defensive and cut off.

As mentor and informal adviser to some top U.S. officials, Mr. Lewis has helped coax the White House to shed decades of thinking about Arab regimes and the use of military power. Gone is the notion that U.S. policy in the oil-rich region should promote stability above all, even if it means taking tyrants as friends. Also gone is the corollary notion that fostering democratic values in these lands risks destabilizing them. Instead, the Lewis Doctrine says fostering Mideast democracy isn't only wise but also imperative.

After Sept. 11, 2001, as policy makers fretted urgently about how to understand and deal with the new enemy, Mr. Lewis helped provide an answer. If his prescription is right, the U.S. may be able to blunt terrorism and stabilize a region that, as the chief exporter of oil, powers the industrial world and underpins the U.S.-led economic order. If it is wrong, as his critics contend, America risks provoking sharper conflicts that spark more terrorism and undermine energy security.

After the terror attacks, White House staffers disagreed about how to frame the enemy, says David Frum, who was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush. One group believed Muslim anger was all a misunderstanding -- that Muslims misperceived America as decadent and godless. Their solution: Launch a vast campaign to educate Muslims about America's true virtue. Much of that effort, widely belittled in the media and overseas, was quietly abandoned.

A faction led by political strategist Karl Rove believed soul-searching over "why Muslims hate us" was misplaced, Mr. Frum says. Mr. Rove summoned Mr. Lewis to address some White House staffers, military aides and staff members of the National Security Council. The historian recited the modern failures of Arab and Muslim societies and argued that anti-Americanism stemmed from their own inadequacies, not America's. Mr. Lewis also met privately with Mr. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice. Mr. Frum says he soon noticed Mr. Bush carrying a marked-up article by Mr. Lewis among his briefing papers. A White House spokesman declined to comment.

Says Mr. Frum: "Bernard comes with a very powerful explanation for why [Sept. 11] happened. Once you understand it, the policy presents itself afterward."

His exposition and the policies it helped set in motion heralded a decisive break with the doctrine that prevailed during the Cold War. Containment, Mr. Kennan said, had "nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward 'toughness.'" It rested on the somber calculation that even the most aggressive enemy wouldn't risk its own demise by provoking war with a powerful U.S.

The Lewis Doctrine posits no such rational foe. It envisions not a clash of interests or even ideology, but of cultures. In the Mideast, the font of the terrorism threat, America has but two choices, "both disagreeable," Mr. Lewis has written: "Get tough or get out." His celebration of toughness is shared by several other influential U.S. Mideast experts, including Fouad Ajami and Richard Perle.

A central Lewis theme is that Muslims have had a chip on their shoulders since 1683, when the Ottomans failed for the second time to sack Christian Vienna. "Islam has been on the defensive" ever since, Mr. Lewis wrote in a 1990 essay called "The Roots of Muslim Rage," where he described a "clash of civilizations," a concept later popularized by Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington. For 300 years, Mr. Lewis says, Muslims have watched in horror and humiliation as the Christian civilizations of Europe and North America have overshadowed them militarily, economically and culturally.

"The question people are asking is why they hate us. That's the wrong question," said Mr. Lewis on public-affairs cable-television station C-SPAN shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks. "In a sense, they've been hating us for centuries, and it's very natural that they should. You have this millennial rivalry between two world religions, and now, from their point of view, the wrong one seems to be winning."

He continued: "More generally . . . you can't be rich, strong, successful and loved, particularly by those who are not rich, not strong and not successful. So the hatred is something almost axiomatic. The question which we should be asking is why do they neither fear nor respect us?"

For Mr. Lewis and officials influenced by his thinking, instilling respect or at least fear through force is essential for America's security. In this formulation, the current era of American dominance, sometimes called "Pax Americana," echoes elements of Pax Britannica, imposed by the British Empire. Mr. Lewis served as a young intelligence officer after graduate school.

Eight days after the Sept. 11 attacks, Mr. Lewis addressed the U.S. Defense Policy Board. Mr. Lewis and a friend, Iraqi exile leader Ahmad Chalabi -- now a member of the interim Iraqi Governing Council -- argued for a military takeover of Iraq to avert still-worse terrorism in the future, says Mr. Perle, who then headed the policy board.

A few months later, in a private dinner with Dick Cheney at the vice president's residence, Mr. Lewis explained why he was cautiously optimistic the U.S. could gradually build democracy in Iraq, say others who attended. Mr. Lewis also held forth on the dangers of appearing weak in the Muslim world, a lesson Mr. Cheney apparently took to heart. Speaking on NBC's "Meet the Press" just before the invasion of Iraq, Mr. Cheney said: "I firmly believe, along with men like **Bernard Lewis**, who is one of the great students of that part of the world, that strong, firm U.S. response to terror and to threats to the United States would go a long way, frankly, toward calming things in that part of the world."

The Lewis Doctrine, in effect, had become U.S. policy.

"Bernard Lewis has been the single most important intellectual influence countering the conventional wisdom

on managing the conflict between radical Islam and the West," says Mr. Perle, who remains a close adviser to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "The idea that a big part of the problem is failed societies on the Arab side is very important. That is not the point of view of the diplomatic establishment."

Mr. Lewis declined to discuss his official contacts in Washington. When told his political influence was a focus of this article, he turned down an interview request. "It's still too early," he said. "Let's see how things turn out" in Iraq. In speeches and articles, Mr. Lewis continues to advocate assertive U.S. actions in the Mideast, but his long-term influence is likely to turn on whether his neoconservative acolytes retain their power in Washington in years to come.

Born in London in 1916, Mr. Lewis was drawn to the study of history and foreign languages by a deep curiosity about "what things looked like from the other side," he said on C-SPAN in April. He earned undergraduate and doctoral degrees in Mideast and Islamic history from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, then spent five years working on Mideast issues for British intelligence during World War II.

Among other things, his wartime service taught him the dangers of appeasement, he told a seminar at the University of Toronto last spring. He said speeches by foes of war in Iraq reminded him of the arguments of peace activists in the 1930s. "All I can say is thank God they didn't prevail then," he said. "If they had, Hitler would have won the war and the Nazis would be ruling the world."

In 1945, Mr. Lewis returned to the University of London as a professor, where he earned renown in Ottoman and Turkish history. He was lured to Princeton in 1974 and soon became a mentor to many of those now known as neoconservatives.

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Mr. Perle recalls hearing Mr. Lewis speak in the early 1970s and inviting him to lunch with Mr. Perle's then-boss, the late Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington. "Lewis became Jackson's guru, more or less," says Mr. Perle. Mr. Lewis also was an adviser to another Democrat, the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, when Mr. Moynihan was ambassador to the United Nations in the 1970s. He formed lasting ties with several young Jackson and Moynihan aides who went on to apply his views to Iraq. Among them were Paul Wolfowitz, now deputy defense secretary; Elliott Abrams, now National Security Council Mideast chief; and Frank Gaffney Jr., a former Pentagon official. Talking with Mr. Lewis, Mr. Perle says, was "like going to Delphi to see the oracle."

Mr. Lewis retired from teaching in 1986 but has maintained ties with many former students in high posts. One, Pentagon analyst Harold Rhode, has played prominent roles as Mr. Wolfowitz's adviser on Islamic affairs, as a planner of the Iraq occupation and as an aide to Pentagon strategist Andrew Marshall. Mr. Lewis dedicated his latest book, "The Crisis of Islam," to Mr. Rhode -- who says Mr. Lewis is "like a father to me."

Mr. Lewis is also close to government circles in Israel and Turkey -- non-Arab lands he describes as the only successful modern states in the region. He warmly praises Kemal Attaturk, who made Turkey a secular republic after World War I by suppressing Islam. Israeli experts say Mr. Lewis's contacts with Turkish generals and politicians helped cement Israeli-Turkish military ties in the 1990s.

Mr. Lewis became politically involved with Israel by the mid-1970s, when he wrote an article for the American Jewish Committee publication *Commentary*. At a time when Israel was dead-set against a Palestinian state, he recommended that Israel "test the willingness" of the Palestine Liberation Organization to negotiate a two-state solution to the conflict.

But Mr. Lewis also wrote that Palestinian Arabs didn't have a historical claim to a state, because Palestine hadn't existed as a country prior to British rule in 1918. Israeli leaders jumped on that part of his thesis. The late Prime Minister Golda Meir required her cabinet to read the article, says Amnon Cohen of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who worked for the West Bank military government. He says Mrs. Meir summoned Mr. Lewis and "they spoke for hours. Her aides tried to end it, but Golda kept going and Bernard didn't want to be rude. She was very much in favor of his point" that Palestine as a nation had never existed.

Mr. Lewis began spending months at a time at the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University in the 1980s. He

became the confidant of successive Israeli prime ministers, including Ariel Sharon. Mr. Cohen organizes an annual conference at Hebrew University in honor of Mr. Lewis's birthday.

Mr. Wolfowitz took part by videoconference in 2002. Signaling the administration's acceptance of Mr. Lewis's prescription for Iraq, Mr. Wolfowitz said: "Bernard has taught how to understand the complex and important history of the Middle East, and use it to guide us where we will go next to build a better world for generations to come."

Mr. Lewis's work has many critics. Some academics say Mr. Lewis's descriptions of Arab and Muslim failures epitomize what the late Edward Said of Columbia University dubbed "Orientalism" -- the shading of history to justify Western conquest. Mideast historian Juan Cole of the University of Michigan praises Mr. Lewis's scholarly works earlier in his career but says his more-popular writings of recent years tend to caricature Muslims as poor losers, helpless and enraged.

Mr. Cole is among those who say Mr. Lewis's call for military intervention to transform failed Muslim states risks making the culture clash between Islamic lands and the West worse. So far, they say, Iraq looks more like a breeding ground for terrorism than a showcase of democracy -- not surprising, they say, given that the U.S. invaded an old and proud civilization.

"Lewis has lived so long, he's managed to live into an era when some people in Washington are reviving empire thinking," says Mr. Cole. "He's never understood the realities of political and social mobilization and the ways they make empire untenable."

Ilan Pappé of Haifa University says Mr. Lewis's view that political cultures can be remade through force contributed to Israel's decision to invade Lebanon in 1982. "It took the Israelis 18 years, and 1,000 soldiers killed, to abandon that strategy," Mr. Pappé says. "If the Americans operate under the same assumptions in Iraq, they'll fail the way the Israelis failed."

After Sept. 11, a book by Mr. Lewis called "What Went Wrong?" was a best-seller that launched the historian, at age 85, as an unlikely celebrity. Witty and a colorful storyteller, he hit the talk-show and lecture circuits, arguing in favor of U.S. intervention in Iraq as a first step toward democratic transformation in the Mideast. Historically, tyranny was foreign to Islam, Mr. Lewis said, while consensual government, if not elections, has deep roots in the Mideast. He said Iraq, with its oil wealth, prior British tutelage and long repression under Saddam Hussein, was the right place to start moving the Mideast toward an open political system.

Audiences lapped it up. At the Harvard Club in New York last spring, guests crowded the main hall, waiting for a word with the historian before his speech. On a day when Baghdad was falling to U.S. forces, one woman wanted to know if the American victory would make Arabs more violent. Mr. Lewis politely deflected the question.

When the throng shifted, another interrogator pushed forward. "Should we negotiate with Iran's ayatollahs?" asked Henry Kissinger.

"Certainly not!" Mr. Lewis responded.

Up on the podium, Mr. Lewis lambasted the belief of some Mideast experts at the State Department and elsewhere that Arabs weren't ready for democracy -- that a "friendly tyrant" was the best the U.S. could hope for in Iraq. "That policy," he quipped, "is called 'pro-Arab.'"

Others, like himself, believe Iraqis are heirs to a great civilization, one fully capable, "with some guidance," of democratic rule, he said. "That policy," he added with a rueful smile, "is called 'imperialism.'"
