

# Playing Cowboy—and Falling off the Horse

By Leon Hadar | August 17, 2006

U.S. President George W. Bush has fancied himself playing Gary Cooper's role in *High Noon*. Yep, Sheriff W. and his loyal deputy Tony B. ride into Mideastville, where they confront a revenge-seeking killer by the name of Saddam and his Islamofascist gang, while cowardly lawmen Jacques C. and Gerhard S. hide in the Old Europe Café. W. vanquishes the enemy and spares the town from frontier justice brought on by a deadly group of outlaws. In the final scene, our cowboy rides into the sunset, leaving behind a once-dishonorable town that has now been transformed into the civilized and prosperous Greater Middle East.

But that screenplay is old, and now it seems that some unhappy “producers” in Washington, DC, are hoping to change the script. After all, it's now “The End of Cowboy Diplomacy,” as *Time* magazine reported in a recent cover story, suggesting that Sheriff W. has had to deal with a steady erosion in his ability to bend Mideastville to his will. No longer does defiance by the Bad Guys necessarily merit threats of punitive action from our hero. He now refrains from posting “Wanted, Dead or Alive” notices and from tossing about indelicate phrases like “Bring 'em on.” “Why can't we all get along?” George W.'s new character pleads.

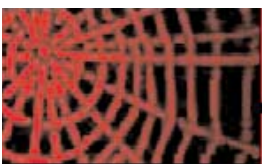
But in the neighborhood of Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon, the sheriff is discovering that in the classic Western narrative, the cowboy who decides to pick a fight either has to kill or be killed. There is no place for wobbly stuff (diplomacy) in dishonorable frontier towns. When the new nemesis, Iran, sensed the cowboy's weakness—the unwillingness to meet outlaw Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at high noon—it was bound to attack more conveniently, by encouraging its hitmen ( Hamas, Hezbollah) to target the other member of W.'s posse, Israel. The result—a shootout in the Levant Hell Saloon.

President Bush's attempt to apply Hollywood's Western genre of Good vs. Bad Guys to make sense of the complex and atavistic political animosities of the Levant area and its peripheries was a costly misjudgment, as was his decision to recruit as his

adviser on the Middle East an aging raconteur of oriental fantasies, Bernard Lewis. In Lewis's *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*—in the first night the United States “liberates” Iraq and discovers weapons of mass destruction—the tale of making the Middle East “safe for democracy” would figure prominently. But the vision promoted by Lewis and other neoconservative fanatics was that of a Democratic Empire, a creature that could have been conceived only through an unnatural union between President Woodrow Wilson and Queen Victoria.

Bush would have been better off killing two birds at with one stone—watching a great film at the same time as he learned something about the Middle East—by watching *Lawrence of Arabia*. Perhaps he might have realized how difficult it would be to impose an imperial order in the Middle East—the feuding Hashemites and Saudis, the never-ending killings between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land, establishing order in divided Iraq—even without adding the Wilsonian soundtrack of democracy and free election. Why would you want, anyway, to disperse freedom to the same people over which you seek to impose an armed hegemony directly (Iraq), indirectly (Lebanon), or through proxies (Palestine)? Why provide the stick (power through elections) to the same players who want to stick it to The Man (who happens to be you)?

Indeed, when hysterical neoconservatives like Bill Kristol urge the Bush administration to protect Israel



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(the region's leading military power and only nuclear weapon state) from two military gangs ( Hamas and Hezbollah) by trying to do an Iraq-style regime change in the capitals of their two sponsors (Tehran and Damascus), it all sounds like a case of dialectical thinking run amok (even veteran Hegelians should take it easy). After all, what were the events that ignited the current crisis—the killing and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers on the border of Gaza and Lebanon—if not a direct consequence of the U.S.-led Democratic Empire, which the Americans are now supposed to resolve by moving this same project of remaking and democratizing the Middle East to another level.

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If the Americans decide to get involved in the current conflict in Lebanon, they could be drawn into another military front in the Middle East, helping to accentuate the claim that a U.S.-Israel axis wants to control the region and is at war with Islam. If the Americans refuse to intervene in any renewed fighting, images of Muslims being killed by the United States and Israel in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Afghanistan would play into the hands of the emerging radical forces and erode the foundation of U.S. hegemony in the region.

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In fact, the ouster of Saddam Hussein and the election of Shiite religious parties in Baghdad with ties to Tehran have helped to shift the balance of power in the Persian Gulf in the direction of the

anti-American Iranian clerics who are the main benefactors of Lebanon's Hezbollah. Hence, the U.S. intervention in Iraq ended up not so much a victory for liberal democracy but for Shiite political power in the Middle East.

At the same time, the Bush administration pressed Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon while promoting a sectarian-based parliamentary election in that country. As a result, Hezbollah strengthened its political influence and joined a government that lacked the will and the military power to disarm the Shiite militia.

Finally, resisting warnings by Israelis and moderate Palestinians, the Bush administration insisted that the free parliamentary election take place in the West Bank and Gaza, which ended up in an electoral victory of Hamas, with which both Jerusalem and Washington have refused to deal. (And let us not forget that Hamas is an off-shoot of the radical Muslim Brotherhood that threatens the pro-U.S. governments in Egypt and Jordan.)

In short, the U.S.-led crusade for democracy in the Middle East (President Wilson) has emboldened radical Shiites and Sunnis in the Middle East, including Hamas and Hezbollah and their regional sponsors, Iran and Syria. At the same time, the United States has tried to advance its strategy of strengthening its imperial position in the Middle East (Queen Victoria) by forcing Iran to end its program of acquiring nuclear technology, by weakening Syria's Baathist regime, and by strangling the economy of Hamas-led Palestine. These U.S. policies created the conditions in which an ad hoc alliance of several anti-American players—Iran, confident in its rising regional influence in the Shiite Crescent, ranging from the Persian Gulf to the Levant, including Lebanon (through its Hezbollah allies), Syria (its secular Arab-Sunni partner), as well as Hamas (the Arab-Sunni radicals in Palestine)—were ready to challenge the United States through its proxy, Israel.

These governments and non-state entities seem to be confident that any outcome of the current crisis can only improve their bargaining power vis-à-vis

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Washington. If the Americans decide to get involved in the current conflict in Lebanon, they could be drawn into another military front in the Middle East, helping to accentuate the claim that a U.S.-Israel axis wants to control the region and is at war with Islam. If the Americans refuse to intervene in any renewed fighting, images of Muslims being killed by the United States and Israel in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Afghanistan would play into the hands of the emerging radical forces and erode the foundation of U.S. hegemony in the region.

The United States is discovering now what many outside global players have learned the hard way—that it is impossible for any actor to impose its particular agendas on the Middle East. In the Middle East, everything is related to everything else; the boundaries between local, national, regional, and international issues are blurred. A player with great expectations arrives on the Mideast scene, trying to make peace between rivals, to spread democracy in this country or socialism in that, or to use nationalist and religious banners to create a sense of unity. But such efforts are bound to result in counter-efforts by unsatisfied players to form opposing regional alliances and to secure the support of other local players and global powers. What is intended does not always happen in a region where “unintended consequences” are the norm, not the exception to the rule. As Middle East historian L. Carl Brown proposed, “Just as with the tilt of the kaleidoscope the many tiny pieces of colored glass all move to form a new configuration, so any diplomatic initiative in the Middle East sets a realignment of the players.”

Hence, outsiders who want to play the Mideast game should expect to become part of the chaotic system—not vehicles to stabilize it. The kaleidoscope turned after the Americans invaded Iraq, and a new configuration has emerged. But as always, the configuration includes similar players—local (Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Turkomans, tribal groupings) and regional (Iran, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Jordan), and comparable problems (religious and ethnic strife, national identity, outside interference)—that

are now driving the region into yet another time of chaos.

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Bush administration officials were hoping that Israeli military power would succeed in defeating both Hezbollah and Hamas and thus counterbalance the rising power of Iran and other radical forces in the region—and that the configuration that will result from this crisis would be favorable to U.S. interests. The problem is that while Israel knows how to execute a successful military campaign against an opposing government-controlled military, it is not clear how Israel can “defeat” unofficial or unconventional forces—asymmetric threats, in the jargon of the day, or “fourth-generation war,” which is the same dilemma that the United States faces in Iraq.

If the fragile truce does not hold, it’s possible that international peacekeeping forces from Europe and Russia could be deployed to the border between Israel and Lebanon (and perhaps eventually the West Bank and Gaza). This could provide the United States with an opportunity to reassess its entire

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Democratic Empire project and take steps to reduce its involvement in the region. That is what empires usually do when the cost of maintaining their hegemony outweigh the benefits. To illustrate that point, I would suggest that Bush consider watching another movie, *The Battle of Algiers*.

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