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Palmer, Michael A. *On Course to Desert Storm: The United States Navy and the Persian Gulf.* Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1992. 199pp. (No price given)

Palmer, Michael A. *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833–1992.* New York: The Free Press, 1992. 328pp. $24.95

FOR THE FIRST CENTURY and more of American national life, the Persian Gulf region, far away, protected by unfavorable winds and offering little commercial promise, was of small interest to the United States. Only in 1833 was the first commercial treaty with the area consummated, and this, a by-product of a mission to the Far East, was with the Sultan of Muscat outside the Persian Gulf. Twenty years later, efforts were made at a treaty with Persia; the first failed owing to Persian desires for political and naval support against the British. A second sanitized effort, ratified in 1857, seemed of so little importance that no American warship visited the Gulf until 1879 and no minister was sent until 1883. Far from forwarding the development of Gulf maritime commerce, the principal American activity in Persia was a growing Presbyterian missionary effort to the Nestorians, supported by way of Constantinople and the Black Sea.

The twentieth century was to be another matter. The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century had been based on coal, laid down, as it seemed, by a benevolent Protestant deity primarily in Great Britain, the United States, and Germany. But in the latter part of the century a new energy source appeared in the form of petroleum, with large deposits in the United States and Russia, and in 1908 a significant discovery was made in Persia. In the age of the dreadnought, the advantages of the new fuel were manifest, but there was no oil in England. In 1912 the Royal Navy, impelled by Sir John Fisher and Winston Churchill, committed its future to oil. In 1914, with the purchase by the British government of a controlling share in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the Persian Gulf acquired a wholly new strategic importance.

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Although Persian oil was of limited significance in the First World War, the obviously increasing importance of the commodity led to interwar competition between the Allies for concessions in the successor states of the Ottoman Empire. Originally resisted by the Europeans, American oil companies emerged in the 1930s with concessions in Bahrein, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, sites of the important new discoveries; in time American companies would become the principal producers of the Gulf region. But the first American military presence in the Gulf came not from oil but from Second World War high strategy, with the establishment of the Persian Gulf Service Command, primarily concerned with pushing Lend-Lease supplies into the Soviet Union over the Trans-Iranian Railway.

With the end of the war the U.S. troops came out of the Persian Gulf, and the U.S. Navy left the Mediterranean, but the hoped-for period of relaxation did not eventuate. Rapid population growth, the increasing importance of the expanding Middle Eastern oil production, the change of the Soviet Union from ally to adversary, the establishment of Israel, the fade-out of European control from Algeria through Iraq and its replacement by governments prone to coups and assassinations, all worked for instability. Nor was the situation improved by the predilection of the advanced powers, not least the United States, for selling modern weaponry to anyone who had the cash. Shortly the U.S. Navy would return to the Mediterranean (originally under the title "Sixth Task Fleet"), and in 1949 a small Middle East Force was created.

For outsiders the most fundamental of all these problems was that of petroleum. After the First World War, Lord Curzon had claimed that the Allies had "floated to victory upon a wave of oil." This was perhaps a slight exaggeration, but certainly the statement would hold in regard to the Second World War, in which oil not only powered everything but emphasized the importance in world affairs of the geography of petroleum.

For long the two great sources of this increasingly vital commodity had been the United States and Russia: there is not a lot of oil in Western Europe, and none in Japan. For the Allies both world wars had largely been fueled by the United States. But the policy of pumping America dry could not continue forever, especially given the expanded requirements for reconstruction and modernization that followed 1945. The great discoveries and expanding production of the Persian Gulf region seemed providential, but the gift did not come free. Not only were Iran and the Arab states of that region unstable, but since the oil belonged to those who owned the territory and its pumping was done by outsiders, there were possibilities of cultural conflict. Where was there a force for order? Traditionally, of course, the British had policed the region, but in 1968, with their loss of India and Egypt, they began to pull out of the area east of Suez.

So, in a fashion reminiscent of the situation a generation earlier, when the British withdrew their support for Greece and Turkey (which gave rise to the Truman Doctrine), came the inheritance of large and distant strategic responsibilities. As in the days of the early Republic, the Persian Gulf was about as far away from the continental United States as one could get. Despite the acknowledged importance of oil, there was a good deal of reluctance in Washington to commit itself to so distant an arena. But one farewell present left by the British was the base rights at Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean. This atoll was far enough from anywhere, in all conscience, but it was better than nothing, and after a slow start in 1967, development was speeded up following the Yom Kippur War and the Arab oil embargo. In 1983 a unified Central Command (CentCom) was established in Florida, responsible for the area from the Arabian Peninsula through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although CentCom and its predecessors focused on the defense of Iran and Gulf oil against the Soviets, matters had become increasingly complex. Expansion of the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean had culminated in the great *Okean* exercise of 1975. In 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the Shah of Iran fell from power, and American embassy personnel were held hostage. In January 1980 President Carter announced that attempts by any outside force to gain control of the Gulf region would be resisted by the United States. In the autumn the possibility of unfriendly control by an in-Gulf force arose as Iran and Iraq went to war.

The presence of American naval forces over these years was not without risk. In 1967 the Israelis shot up and severely damaged the USS *Liberty*. In 1986 Libyan terrorism in Europe led to American air strikes on Tripoli and Benghazi. In 1987 the USS *Stark* was heavily damaged by an Iraqi Exocet attack and the United States intervened for the first time, on the side of Kuwait, by agreeing to re-flag Kuwaiti tankers under American colors as protection against Iranian attack. In April 1988 the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was heavily damaged by an Iranian mine, and in reprisal the U.S. Navy destroyed two Iranian oil platforms, a frigate, and some small craft. On 3 July an American cruiser regrettably shot down an Iranian airbus. On 18 July Iran accepted a United Nations (UN) resolution calling for a cease-fire.

Up to this point both books are pretty much like two peas in a pod. But as *On Course* was approaching publication, Saddam Hussein raised the ante. Hastily inserting ten pages on the Gulf War into his preface, Mr. Palmer, with impressive speed, then produced another hundred pages to form the second half of *Guardians of the Gulf*. On the basis of coverage alone, then, this is the volume of choice. Both books are solidly researched and clearly written. Both have large and useful bibliographies. *On Course* has photographs, *Guardians* does not. Since the effort started out as a naval history, *Guardians* is perhaps inevitably a little short on Air Force and Army material when the war comes: the B-52s, for

example, rate only a single sentence. The treatment of ground action diverges somewhat from that of General Norman Schwarzkopf. But considering the complexities of writing operational history and the speed with which the effort was accomplished, it is a very creditable job.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the outsiders had relaxed. The United States and the European powers on the scene reduced their naval forces, but there was no relaxation in Baghdad. In the spring of 1990 Saddam Hussein mounted a rhetorical offensive against the United States and his Arab "brothers," concentrating his troops on the Kuwaiti border. On 2 August he invaded. Foreign condemnation, UN resolutions, and Arab efforts at peacemaking got nowhere. So what was the future of Saudi Arabian oil? Within a week of the invasion George Bush had drawn his "line in the sand," Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and General Schwartzkopf flew to Jidda, King Fahd requested assistance, and the first American air and ground forces had been started to Arabia.

There followed, as all know, five months of frenzied buildup, coalition building, and fruitless diplomacy—while Saddam neither went for the Saudi oil fields nor reversed course for home—then a thirty-eight-day air campaign, and finally one hundred hours of ground action. Then the troops were started homeward.

With such a famous victory one might have thought that the Persian Gulf would be stabilized for a while, but life is not so predictable. Two years later George Bush, the architect of the coalition, had been retired to private life by his grateful constituents while Saddam Hussein still reigned in Baghdad, making mischief as best he could. It looks like a story that has no end.

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Even if forces are unavailable, orders can be issued. . . .

James A. Field, Jr.
History of United States Naval Operations: Korea, 1962

Naval officers prefer to make history rather than to write it—because of which preference they probably do a better job of the former.

Admiral Ernest J. King, 1942