

INVENTING THE MIDDLE EAST

UW classicist William Westermann led America's first attempt to re-create the Middle East.

BY JOHN ALLEN

The critical event in the history of the modern Middle East very nearly happened on the night of January 20, 1919. Nearly, but not quite.

It might have happened, not in Baghdad or Mecca or Damascus, but in Paris, in the dining room of the Hotel Crillon on the Rue de la Concorde. And the almost-key players weren't prophets or potentates, but history teachers — lead among them William Westermann, a classics professor at the University of Wisconsin.

With him that night were the historians George Beer and James Shotwell of Columbia University and Isaiah Bowman, president of the American Geographical Society. They had come to France not to study the past but to build the future, to attend the Paris Peace Conference and help write the treaties that would end the First World War. All were members of the Inquiry, a U.S. government organization charged with nothing less than redesigning the world into ethnically logical, politically viable states. Westermann led the Inquiry's western Asia section, focusing on the Middle East.

The food at the Crillon was excellent — “too good to make me feel quite comfortable,” Westermann wrote in his diary, “since so many people here are without proper food.” The armistice was just seventy days old, and the French had not even begun to recover. Most likely the meal included neither wine nor pork — that night's guest was the emir Feisal, son of Hussein ibn Ali, the sheriff of Mecca. He spoke no English, and the Americans spoke no Arabic, so another guest, a British colonel named T. E. Lawrence, translated. He, too, was a historian, an

Oxford-trained medievalist. But that night, Westermann recorded, he wore “a gray cloth over the head falling back over the shoulders, held in place by a sort of white coil with pink balls of cloth here and there” — the trademark kaffiyeh of his persona as Lawrence of Arabia.

Feisal and Lawrence talked of the Arabs' role in the war and their revolt against the Ottoman Turks. Lawrence's exploits were already becoming legend: the ride of the camel cavalry, the capture of Dera'a, the grim work of shooting Arab wounded so that they wouldn't fall into Turkish hands. During the war, Lawrence said, the Arabs had taken twenty thousand Turkish prisoners; the Turks had taken six Arabs alive.

More importantly, they talked about history. For centuries, the Turks had ruled the entire Middle East from the Nile to the borders of Iran. But Turkey had chosen the losing side in World War I, and now its empire was crumbling. According to Feisal, the Arabs dreamed of creating their own free state. If the Americans agreed to support independence, there would be statues raised to them in Arab towns. But, he said, “any man who would try to split the Arab people when they were uniting was a devil.”

Westermann was swept away. That night, he wrote in his diary: “Great is Lawrence and great is Feisal. I am a convert.”

History was on the verge of unfolding very differently. There would be no Iraq or Syria or Lebanon or Jordan, and probably no Israel or Saudi Arabia. There would be just one Arab nation, developing free of Western interference.



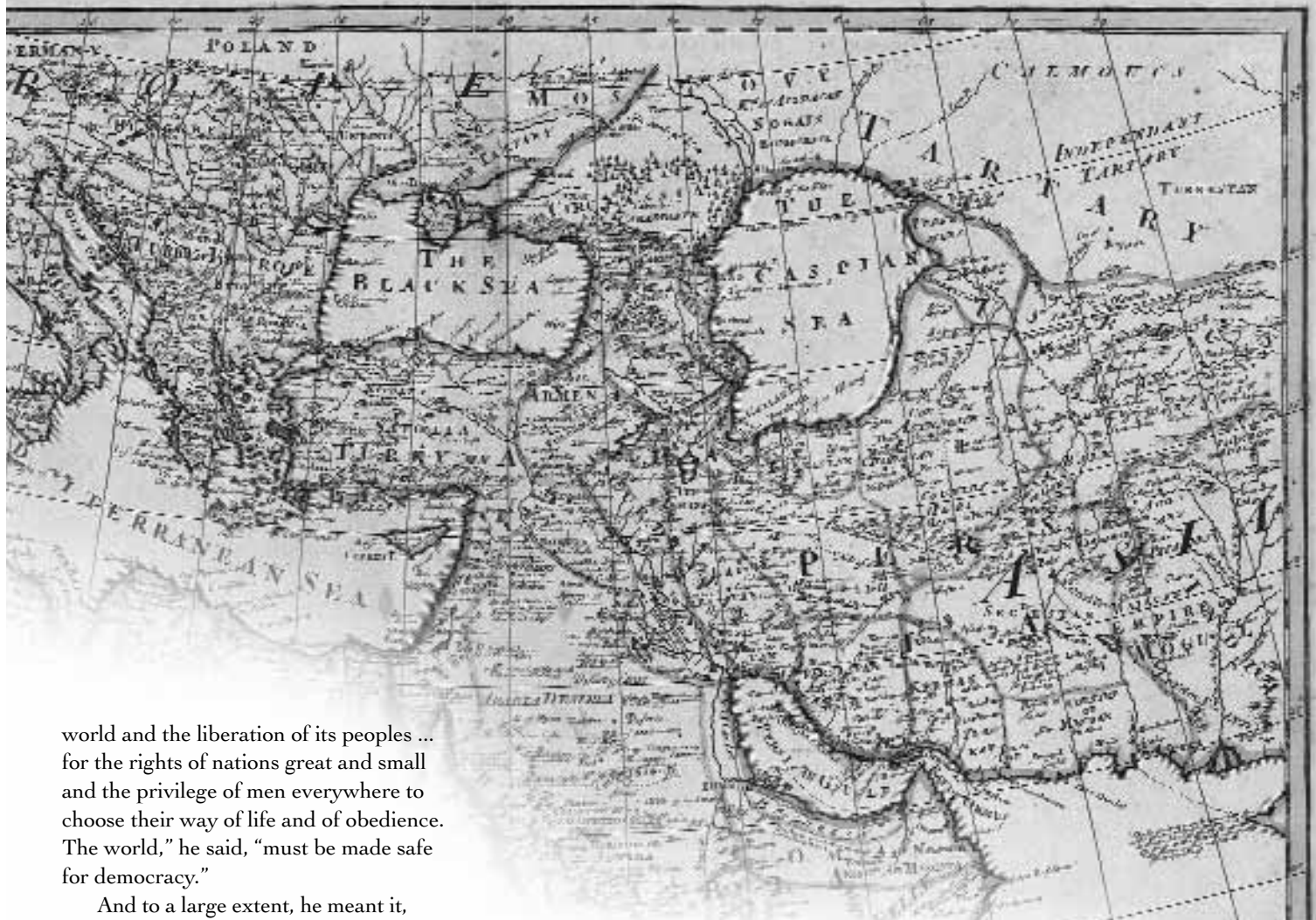
Classicist William Westermann's studies occasionally carried him to the Turkish Empire. The U.S. government desperately needed experts on this part of the world — even if their expertise ended around the age of Caesar.

If the Inquiry had the authority that Westermann believed it did, this would have been the Middle East's decisive moment.

But Westermann was wrong.

Today, as the Middle East again seems to be boiling toward vast change, it's tempting to see events there as unprecedented. President Bush has declared that Iraq will be a first step toward removing tyranny, spreading democracy, and engendering peace. “The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution,” he's said.

But this isn't the first time the world has approached this watershed. Eighty-five years ago, the U.S. government believed it could put democracy on the march, in the Middle East and everywhere else. President Woodrow Wilson believed that authoritarian governments were a cancer, and the First World War was their fatal result. Democracy would be the antidote. When he asked Congress to declare war in 1917, he said that the United States wasn't fighting for its own self-interest but “for the peace of the



world and the liberation of its peoples ... for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world," he said, "must be made safe for democracy."

And to a large extent, he meant it, though he wasn't sure how to bring this happy state into being. So he asked the Departments of State and War to create an organization to determine what concrete goals America should fight for. Wilson, who'd been president of Princeton University before entering politics, had an abiding faith in doctors of philosophy, so he wanted this group to be made up of academics who would sift and winnow the truth, not diplomats or soldiers who would look for strategic advantage.

Wilson also wanted their purpose and existence to be kept secret — both from the enemy, who shouldn't know U.S. war aims, and from the electorate, which was overwhelmingly isolationist. The result was the Inquiry, a vaguely named organization intended, according to one of its early reports, to be "a new idea in international relations — the idea of utilizing the expert services of scholars in determining the facts that should be the bases of the peace settlements."

John Cooper, a UW historian who specializes in U.S. foreign policy of this

period, describes the Inquiry as a combination of today's National Security Council, CIA, and other intelligence services, only without the espionage. "What they did was create the first real system for gathering expert advice, studies, and detailed plans," he says. "They put a lot of energy into planning for the peace negotiations, for what to do if and when we won the war."

Walter Lippmann, the Inquiry's secretary, set the standard for recruiting scholars. "What we are on the lookout for," he wrote, "is genius — sheer, startling genius, and nothing else will do, because the real application of the President's idea to those countries requires inventiveness and resourcefulness, which is scarcer than anything."

The Inquiry was ultimately divided into eight geographic sections covering the war's most pressing problem areas, including the Franco-German border, Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, the Balkans, eastern Asia, western

The map above shows the Ottoman Empire near its height, in 1721. Until 1914, it covered almost all the territory we call the Middle East today. After World War I, Westermann (and President Wilson) envisioned a much more diverse Middle East (next page).

Asia, and colonies around the globe. The most acute need was for western Asia, for Turkey, a country of which few Americans had any concrete knowledge. The United States hadn't declared war on Turkey — just its German and Austrian allies — but its territory contained a mass of potential ethnic conflicts: Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Arabs. Ignorance here, Lippmann thought, could ruin everything. "It isn't difficult to win the war and lose the peace," he cautioned. "England did it over and over again in the nineteenth century in regard to Turkey."

Into this vacuum stepped Westermann, then a rising star on the UW faculty. His students found him shy and prickly, a teacher "in the German style," meaning he was a martinet in the

classroom. But he'd traveled in the Middle East, and his politics were impeccable. In an essay published in 1917, he wrote about "our great tradition of readiness to help any people to attain freedom." Like Wilson, he believed it was America's destiny to make the world safe for democracy.

"Ordinarily, historians stay at some distance from their subjects," says Cooper. "Which one of us wouldn't want to have an effect on history, to make it?" When the Inquiry contacted Westermann, he joined.

If in the current war in Iraq, the U.S. suffers from having too few allies, it faced the opposite problem in 1919: at the end of World War I, there were too many friends sitting at the table. In all, some thirty-two nations counted themselves among the victors and sent official representatives to the Paris Peace Conference. Each of them wanted a reward.

When the war began in the summer of 1914, the lineup of leading powers had been much smaller. The German and Austrian Empires were on one side, and the Triple Entente — Russia, France,

and the British Empire — were on the other. Then things got complicated. The Turks sided with the Germans late in 1914, and in 1915, Italy joined the Entente. What held these alliances together was the promise of territory — the winners would take land from the losers. And the Entente powers coveted the land of the Turkish Empire.

In 1915 and 1916, the members of the Entente negotiated a series of secret agreements dividing up Turkey and its Middle Eastern possessions. "If you look at the treaties," says Cooper, "the powers were treating Turkey like a big pie. Each one wanted a slice." The most notorious of these agreements was the Sykes-Picot Treaty, named for its authors, the British aristocrat Sir Mark Sykes and the French diplomat Georges Picot. It promised France the lands that are now Lebanon and Syria, along with the Kurdish region around Mosul in modern Iraq; Britain would take Mesopotamia and today's Jordan. Palestine was to fall under international jurisdiction, though this plan was complicated by the British foreign minister, Arthur James Balfour, who publicly declared that the region

should become "a national home for the Jewish people."

The secret agreements came to light in December 1917, and that same month, the Inquiry gave the president its list of suggested wartime goals, which Wilson adopted as his peace terms, known as the Fourteen Points. The first specified that all international agreements should henceforth be "open covenants of peace,

openly arrived at." The twelfth demanded that "nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of an autonomous development."

These two points would guide Westermann's efforts in examining the Middle East. He felt the allies' treaties were "follies of secrecy and blind self-interest," but he also believed that they could be undone through America's moral and economic influence. "I did not see how the French-British agreements could hold," he wrote, "since we came into the war ignorant of them."

And so he and his Inquiry colleagues went to work. Scouring the nation's libraries and archives, they assembled their evidence. They indexed books and articles to find historic, economic, and military facts. They collected old maps and made new ones, delimiting ethnic boundaries and evaluating the national aspirations of "suppressed, oppressed, and backward peoples." They wrote up what were, essentially, comprehensive research papers, but instead of publishing them, they expected to see them turned into national policy.

The idea of destroying the Ottomans pleased Westermann. Theirs, he thought, was "a government whose corruption was a stench in the nostrils of the world." But their end posed a series of thorny questions: Should the Kurds have their own state? The Armenians? Who should control Istanbul and the straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean? Was the Balfour Declaration proposing a Jewish state really a wise policy? Westermann knew that, in Palestine, Arabs outnumbered Jews six to one. Making Palestine a national home for the Jewish people seemed undemocratic. And yet Wilson had already endorsed the plan.

And, finally, the Arabs: ought they to be one state or many? They were a diverse people, made up not just of Sunni Muslims, but Shiites, too, and also Druses and Christians — Maronite, Nestorian, and Assyrian.

By the time the fighting ended in November 1918, Westermann's western



THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE
 (Lines of the British, French, Italian, and other administrative units)
 This wonderful map, the domain of the Ottoman Empire, was made by the Hon. Mark Sykes, M.P., in cooperation with the Hon. Georges Picot, in response to the 14th Point of the Fourteen Points, and was approved by the British and French Governments in 1916. It is a masterpiece of cartography, and is a valuable reference work. Scale 1:1,000,000. and is the basis of the British and French administrative units.

“If my assumption is correct, the Turkish Empire is the looting ground of the war.”

Asia section had generated sheaves of documents: maps and charts, economic reports and historical narratives. All of these were crated up for President Wilson and his negotiating team to take to Paris. With them went Westermann and the other leaders of the Inquiry, now officially called the Division of Territorial, Economic, and Political Intelligence. During the crossing, Wilson gave his experts a boost of confidence. “Tell me what is right and I will fight for it,” he told them. “Give me a guaranteed position.”

When Westermann arrived in Paris on December 15, he found that all eyes followed the movements of the Big Four — Wilson, British prime minister David Lloyd George, French premier Georges Clemenceau, and Italian prime minister Vittorio Orlando. But Westermann preferred the smaller gatherings of the truly knowledgeable — people like himself, who would, he assumed, be the true authors of the peace.

The more people he met, the more he believed Feisal was right, that Arab unity and independence was the best policy. He had few illusions about what sort of governments would arise in a free Middle East. Most Arabs told him that Feisal was weak and represented only one faction in a complex Arab community. And many of them told him that, if given full independence, the Arabs would fight among themselves to their own ruin. But it seemed better than the alternative — abandoning them to occupying powers.

With a bow toward Wilson’s rhetoric, the British and French governments had suggested that they be given not colonies but mandates over the Arab lands — something like a mentor-protégé relationship in which they’d control the territory until the Arabs learned good government. The Arabs, Westermann realized, “have absolutely no faith in the term ‘mandate’ as it is interpreted by the French and British.” There was no time

limit for how long the Western powers would control Arabia, and the borders of the mandates looked suspiciously like those arranged in the secret treaties.

“If my assumption ... is correct,” he wrote, “the Turkish Empire is the looting ground of the war and the talk of self-determination and ‘the wishes of the peoples concerned’ is just a succession of futile phrases.” Westermann had come to his absolute position. Now it was up to Wilson to fight for it.

The trouble was, the French and British wanted Arabia very badly. The two powers had impoverished themselves fighting the war, and there was money to be made in the Middle East in cotton and oil. And Wilson needed their support for his own strongest desire, creating an international body that would prevent future disputes from growing into new wars: the League of Nations. Charles Seymour, the Inquiry specialist in charge of the Austria-Hungary section, told Westermann that “President Wilson would sacrifice his principles, in the matter of territorial settlements, to get compromises upon the League of Nations.”

Westermann found that he was being ignored — or worse, edited. “A statement entirely unfavorable to the ‘Jewish State’ idea ... had become entirely favorable,” he recorded. “This sort of thing is impossible. Many of the ideas are not mine at all, and [my report] reads like a valedictorian high school address.”

Finally, Westermann was told to stop interfering. He received a memo stating that, as the United States had never actually declared war on Turkey, it had no business making demands. Effectively, wrote Westermann, that was the end. “We could not oppose the division of Asia Minor and the Arab countries on the basis of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.”

When the Big Four met to discuss the final disposition of the Ottoman Empire in May, Westermann found that he and all the other experts were locked out. “It was evident that they did not

want anyone in there who had any real comprehension of what was going on,” he wrote in his diary.

Soon afterward, he asked to be released from the peace conference, and at the end of June, he set sail for America. He returned on the president’s ship but records no more conversations with Wilson. “The more I see of great men,” Westermann wrote, “the less I think of them.”

Ultimately, Westermann concluded, “the war was a tragedy to the Arab cause,” and the peace conference was worse. It would, he thought, rot the Middle East “until the distant day when the Arabs and all the East shall definitely discard the unjustified assumption of Westerners embodied in the formula of the ‘white man’s burden.’ In principle, it is only a white-washed imperialism, chiefly commercial.” He predicted it would result in centuries of blood.

When the final treaties with Turkey were written, France received mandates over Lebanon and Syria, but had to fight a war to keep them. Feisal abandoned Paris for Damascus in the spring of 1919, and declared himself King of Syria. The French drove him out. The British received mandates over Palestine, Transjordan (today’s Jordan), and Mesopotamia, to which was added Mosul. They created a name for the country, Iraq, and installed Feisal as its king — then fought a war against the region’s Shiites and Kurds to keep him there.

Back in the States, Westermann did not stay long at the UW. His Inquiry connections opened Ivy League doors, and in 1920, he secured a position at Cornell University, then, in 1923, at Columbia, joining Beer and Shotwell. He gave up foreign affairs and wrote little about his experience at the Peace Conference. He donated his Paris diary to the library at Columbia, but only on the understanding that no one would look at it without his permission until well after he had died. Historians, it seemed, should record history, not make it. 📖

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