

## FROM WILSON TO BIDEN: MIDDLE EAST CHALLENGES

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice once described the theme of President George W. Bush's Middle Eastern policy as 'muscular' Wilsonianism. What I hope we can do is explore the major features of American efforts to come to grips with the violent upheavals that have characterized the Middle East (itself a contentious term) since the end of World War I. Wilson's Fourteen Points speech set the stage by proposing a mandate system to come to grips with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. But it soon became a grab bag for the spoils of war. England and France had already drawn up plans to re-imagine the old regime their way by drawing new boundaries that would cement control over the area and especially its seemingly boundless supply of oil. The United States then pursued various efforts to break through that cement, eventually succeeding in gaining a major concession in Saudi Arabia.

But in World War II American policy took on its first military aspect as the Allies occupied Iran to insure war supplies got through to the Soviet Union. President Franklin D. Roosevelt then used the wartime regime to re-imagine Wilsonian themes along the lines of American aid to develop Iranian resources. At the 1943 Teheran Conference he also talked about taking Indochina from France; and after the Yalta Conference in 1945 he entertained "Three Kings" aboard his warship in the Suez Canal while British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was left alone after the Big Three Conference to fume about American interference.

The opening "shots" in the Cold War actually came in the Middle East as the US and Russia clashed over the end of the Iranian occupation in 1946. The 1947 Truman Doctrine made it clear who would call the shots. Recognizing Israel demonstrated American willingness to oversee the political map over the whole area. In 1953 Washington blocked the first serious revolutionary challenge by using the CIA to overthrow an Iranian prime minister who appeared ready to accept aid from the Soviet Union in his quest to nationalize the country's oil wells. In 1956, on the other hand, Washington brought to a halt an Anglo-French-Israeli effort to topple Egyptian strong man Colonel Nasser.

Ten years later, the situation looked very different and Washington tacitly stood aside as another Egyptian-Israeli war loomed. By this time the Egyptian-Israeli question had become deeply involved in Cold War strategies, a situation that continued over the next two decades. Richard Nixon's update on the Truman Doctrine in the wake of Vietnam's imminent "fall" -- that the United States would not send troops but give all out support to local pro-American rulers -- proved to be hollow rhetoric when the new face of revolution appeared in Iran in 1979. The humiliating fallout from the occupation of the American Embassy in Teheran brought down President Carter. Reagan was almost undone by the Iran-Contra scandal. George H.W. Bush defeated Saddam Hussein's forces in a matter of day, but it proved to be a false promise of peace for the Middle East. Out of a clear sky came the 9/11 shock and the new pledge to wage a Wilsonian type War on Terror. President George W. Bush led the nation to war under the banners of yellow cake confusion and premature Mission Accomplished bravado. Now there were two wars to finish. President Obama promised support for Wilsonian type revolutions and undertook nation building in Afghanistan as he tracked down the author of 9/11, Osama Bin Laden. But he could not end the war in Afghanistan. Joe Biden pulled out the final contingent of American troops from Afghanistan amidst the chaos of suicide bombs and a misdirected drone strike. The never-ending war has thus produced a never- ending series of controversies.

---

**LEADER:** Lloyd Gardner taught American foreign policy at Rutgers University for 49 years.

**LOCATION:** Zoom

**THURSDAYS:** 10:00 a.m. to noon, 8 weeks beginning March 3 through April 21

**MAXIMUM:** Unlimited