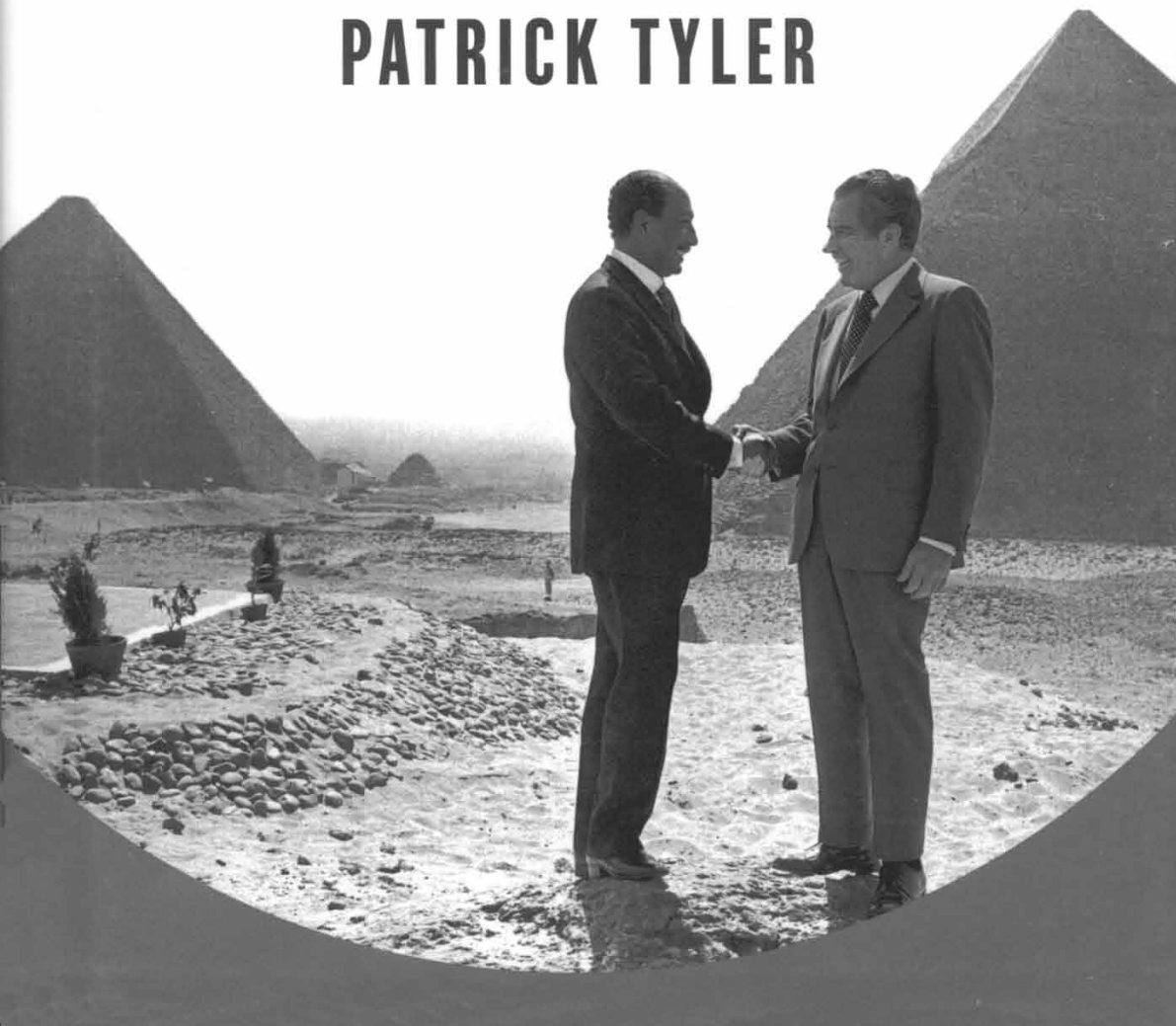


A WORLD OF TROUBLE

*The White House and the Middle East—
from the Cold War to the War on Terror*

PATRICK TYLER



THE MIDDLE EAST is the beginning and the end of U.S. foreign policy: events there influence our alliances, make or break presidencies, govern the price of oil, and draw us into war. In this gripping story of American misadventures in the region, Patrick Tyler shows that the history of American presidents' dealings there is one of mixed motives, skulduggery, deceit, and outright foolishness, in addition to policy making and diplomacy.

Tyler draws on newly opened presidential archives to dramatize the approach to the Middle East in U.S. presidencies from Eisenhower's to George W. Bush's. He takes us into the Oval Office and shows how our leaders made momentous decisions; at the same time, the sweep of his narrative—from the Suez crisis to the Iran hostage debacle to George W. Bush's catastrophe in Iraq—lets us see the big picture as never before. Tyler tells a story of presidents being drawn into Middle East affairs against their will, being kept in the dark by local potentates, being led astray by grasping subordinates, and making decisions about the internal affairs of countries they hardly understand. Most tellingly, he shows how each president has managed to undo the policies of his predecessor, often fomenting both anger against America in the streets of the region and confusion at home.

A World of Trouble is the Middle East book we need now: compulsively readable, free of cant and ideology, and rich in insight about the very human challenges a new president will face as he tries to restore America's standing in the region.



PATRICK TYLER has reported extensively from both the Middle East and Washington for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. A Texan, he lives in Washington, D.C.

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*The White House and the Middle East—from
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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX • NEW YORK

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

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Distributed in Canada by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.
Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2009

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tyler, Patrick.

A world of trouble : the White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror / Patrick Tyler.— 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-374-29289-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-374-29289-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Middle East—Foreign relations—United States. 2. United States—Foreign relations—Middle East. 3. Middle East—Politics and government—20th century. 4. United States—Politics and government—20th century. 5. Middle East—Politics and government—21st century. 6. United States—Politics and government—21st century. I. Title.

DS63.2.U5 T95 2008

327.7305609'045—dc22

2008041261

Designed by Debbie Glasserman

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

To Linda . . .

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A WORLD OF TROUBLE



PROLOGUE

America in the Middle East

Night had long since fallen over central Saudi Arabia in early 2004 when George Tenet came trudging out of his bedroom in Prince Bandar bin Sultan's palace and asked for scotch whiskey.

In Riyadh, the capital of a conservative Islamic monarchy where alcohol was banned and women were not allowed to drive, it was possible in the cloister of the Saudi royal family to grant this wish to the American director of Central Intelligence.

Tenet had retired for the evening, or so the household thought. His security detail was bedded down.

It was unusual for a CIA director to have such a close relationship with a foreign envoy, but Prince Bandar was an unusual figure, having served for more than two decades in Washington as ambassador to four American presidents, having traveled the globe on discreet missions for his king, and having nurtured long-standing friendships—almost familial in character—with George H. W. Bush and his son, George W. Bush.

The CIA delegation had arrived late and eaten sumptuously from a buffet of lamb, salad, and sweets that Bandar's staff laid out. A CIA bodyguard and two senior officers, the director of the CIA's Near East Division and the agency's general counsel, had accompanied Tenet for the overnight. The CIA station chief, based in the kingdom, had joined them, as had Prince Salman, Bandar's younger half brother. But Tenet's group was tired and groggy from a tough itinerary that included a high-security stop in Iraq. The next morning, they were headed for Amman, Jordan.

Tenet took a sleeping pill and Bandar walked him down the hall to the guest room and said good night. But fifteen minutes later, the door to Tenet's room opened and closed. The director was stalking the elegant corridors in search of the prince. Bandar and his closest aide, Rihab Masoud, were still up watching television in the family room, which offered an inviting splay of well-stuffed divans oriented toward a wall covered with large-screen televisions. This high-tech array, with nine news channels on display at once, was a feature of Prince Bandar's villas, manor houses, and chalets around the world.

One wall of the broad living area was glass, which opened onto a large veranda paved with the blond native stone of central Arabia and overlooking a sparkling pool and a grove of date palms. Each year, the dates were harvested and sealed in vacuum packs to be delivered as gifts to friends of Prince Bandar and his wife, Princess Haifa, the youngest daughter of the late King Faisal.

On one wall, a portrait of Bandar's grandfather, King Abdul Aziz al-Saud, the tall and powerfully built warrior who had unified modern Saudi Arabia and who had cast the country's lot with America, looked down on them with a stern visage.

The prince had just suggested to Massoud that he, too, stay over because it was already 1:00 a.m. They were talking about Iraq and the troubles that had befallen the administration of George W. Bush when Tenet reappeared, disheveled in his boxers and T-shirt and with thunder in his mood.

"I can't sleep," he said.

A servant appeared with a bottle. Tenet knocked back some of the scotch. Then some more. They watched with concern. He drained half the bottle in a few minutes.

"They're setting me up. The bastards are setting me up," Tenet said, but "I am not going to take the hit."

The prince understood what Tenet was talking about. Someone had to take the blame for the missing weapons of mass destruction—the overarching pretext for the war in Iraq—and Tenet was raging against the realization that the White House expected him to fall on his sword to protect the president.

As the scotch melted what was left of his restraint, Tenet began to flail verbally at his enemies: the “assholes” in the Pentagon, the “crazies” and sneering ideologues in the White House, especially around Vice President Dick Cheney.

According to one witness, he mocked the neoconservatives in the Bush administration and their alignment with the right wing of Israel’s political establishment, referring to them with exasperation as, “the Jews.”¹

More scotch. More invective.

After arriving in Riyadh, Tenet had spent part of his time on his secure phone back to Langley, sometimes shouting over the instrument to his deputy, John McLaughlin. “Fuck you . . . no, no, no, we are not going to take this . . . we’ve picked enough shit off our backs.” Those were the lines that echoed in Bandar’s ears, and it seemed that Tenet was spitting mad, negotiating, indirectly, with the White House on what would be said about the intelligence meltdown.

“I am going to protect the agency and my ass,” Tenet had stated emphatically.*

Tenet was going to need a lot of protection, because by early 2004 the sham of the prewar intelligence had been revealed. David Kay, the veteran United Nations weapons inspector and chief of the Iraq Survey Group in Baghdad, had abruptly resigned and stated publicly that he didn’t think Saddam Hussein had possessed any stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons.

*The scene at Prince Bandar’s palace is taken from the accounts of three people who witnessed it, including the CIA Near East division chief, who was responsible for writing the trip report and who was not drinking. Tenet, in an interview, initially suggested he had not stayed at Prince Bandar’s palace. He then denied that he had said anything during his midnight foray to the pool, which he asserted was of short duration. He disputed the remarks attributed to him and denied that his memory might have been affected by the amount of alcohol he was reported to have consumed on top of a sleeping pill. The CIA general counsel who accompanied Tenet to Saudi Arabia also disputed the account of the other witnesses, saying that he was with Tenet every moment during the evening; he asserted that Tenet did not make the remarks attributed to him by others.

“We were almost all wrong, and I certainly include myself,” he told the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 28. Kay had seen enough to conclude that “it is highly unlikely that there were large stockpiles of deployed militarized chemical and biological weapons there.” Not only Americans were shocked. Many Iraqis—scientists, military men, and Baath Party officials—had assumed, as the CIA had, that Saddam maintained hidden stockpiles of weapons.

“We weren’t smart enough to understand that the hardest thing in intelligence is when behavior remains consistent but underlying reasons change,” Kay told the senators. Though Saddam had built a terrifying military mystique based on chemical warfare in the 1980s, the Iraqi dictator’s desire to end United Nations sanctions impelled him to destroy his arsenal. Apparently, it was as simple as that. Even Saddam, after his capture, admitted he had kept up the pretense that he was armed with weapons of terror: “You guys just don’t understand. This is a rough neighborhood.”²

After Kay’s bombshell, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that he, too, was having second thoughts about the war based on Kay’s testimony. “The absence of a stockpile [of chemical or biological weapons in Iraq] changes the political calculus,” he told the editors at *The Washington Post*, pointing out that the Americans had overwhelmingly supported the war “with the understanding that there was a stockpile and there were weapons” that posed significant threat to the United States and its allies. Powell all but retracted his remarks the next day, but the damage had been done.

For many Americans, such candor from inside the intelligence establishment was both illuminating and devastating. It didn’t matter that the Survey Group had reaffirmed Saddam’s capacity to reconstitute his illicit weapons program, or that he had been developing ballistic missile systems that might deliver new weapons in the future. It didn’t matter that Saddam had killed or scarred tens of thousands of Kurds and Iranians with nerve agents or mustard gas, or that he had been twice discovered developing nuclear weapons. Hadn’t the Israelis destroyed Iraq’s Osirak reactor in 1981 to block one effort at getting an atomic bomb? And a decade later, UN inspectors discovered and destroyed a second and more advanced nuclear program.

All that mattered in the winter of 2004 for many Americans—and Britons as well, for they had been mobilized for war by the same intelli-

gence claims—was that they had been colossally misled. Kay said that it was “important that we acknowledge failure,” but acknowledging failure was not something that came easily to the Bush administration when so many lives had been taken and so many billions spent on a war that had bogged down into a costly, low-intensity conflict against Iraqi insurgents and an influx of al-Qaeda operatives.

The White House had begun erecting its defense: Bush had relied on Tenet and the CIA in making the final decision for war based on the unambiguous CIA assessment that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction—the “slam dunk” case, as Tenet had famously referred to it.³ Tenet knew that, in the end, he bore responsibility for the final intelligence judgments on Iraq that were presented to Bush. The National Intelligence Estimate that the CIA had produced and that had served as the foundation of the administration’s case for war was Tenet’s product. And it was wrong.

Tenet had tried to defend himself in public. “In the intelligence business, you are almost never completely wrong or completely right,” he said in a speech at Georgetown University days after Kay’s testimony. The CIA “painted an objective assessment for our policy-makers of a brutal dictator who was continuing his efforts to deceive and build programs that might constantly surprise us and threaten our interests.”

Now the flaws in the CIA’s analysis, its deductive leaps, the unreliable sources were coming back to haunt Tenet’s doorstep, and the sulfurous tone that was filling Bandar’s spacious family room suggested to the prince that his friend had made up his mind to leave the administration.

“My run is done,” Tenet had told his top aides on the plane coming out to Saudi Arabia. “We did our job. We called it like we saw it, but this is going to be a rough period and I think I want to get out.”

The lines of loyalty and trust that had sustained Tenet in the Bush circle had snapped. Now the question was whether Tenet would leave with a modicum of dignity, or whether his enemies in the White House would drive him out unceremoniously, because Tenet had always had detractors among the neoconservatives. It was also an election year. The 9/11 Commission Report was due out, and Tenet knew that the CIA was going to get blasted for having withheld critical information from the FBI about two of the 9/11 hijackers who had been in the country for eighteen months before the attacks.

Bush had been one of Tenet’s defenders. “Tenet’s under lots of pres-

sure, but I am going to stick with him—I like him,” Bush had confided to one of his Iraq advisers the previous October.⁴

To Bandar, Tenet was a lot like Powell: instinctively loyal, protective of the boss, and a strong member of the team. Neither was martyr material. They might remonstrate privately, but that was just part of the process of giving in to the inevitable realization that they would have to leave.

“I would like to go swimming,” Tenet suddenly announced.

Bandar and Massoud exchanged looks of alarm; Tenet was clearly too drunk to swim. All that scotch on top of a sleeping pill: How long would he be conscious? They followed closely out into the warm midnight air of Riyadh as Tenet rumbled down the stairs, still in his underwear, and threw himself into the water.

Somehow Tenet managed to hold on to a Havana cigar and a glass of scotch. But his watch flew off and CIA aides dove to the bottom of the pool to retrieve it. There was the director of U.S. intelligence, bobbing up and down, trying to recover his mood with humor and defiance. He did impressions of Yasser Arafat and of Omar Suleiman, the Egyptian intelligence chief who loved to make sport of how fat Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, had become.

Tenet gazed down at his own mountainous girth. He had gained thirty-five pounds during his directorship. “I’m a pig!” he shouted into the night.

Bandar watched from a stool by the bar where a Pakistani servant was mixing drinks. Let the guy have a swim; it was the least he could do for Tenet. Bandar had observed five American presidents from close quarters and he recognized the political excision that was under way.

There was nothing Bandar could do to save the best friend he had ever had in a CIA director. Though the antiterror war had gotten brutal, Bandar believed that Tenet had performed a great service to the United States and to its allies. No CIA director—not even the legendary William Casey of the Reagan era—had worked as effectively in the Middle East to build an intelligence alliance that actually worked behind the veil. Tenet had a gift for personal relations. He laid on hands, he shared gossip about despots and potentates, and he kept secrets. He had won the confidence of the Arabs as well as the Israelis. He demonstrated American trust by presenting key foreign leaders with CIA secure phones that enabled them to speak to the president or his aides without risk of interception. Among the first to receive them had been the Saudi royal court and the Israeli prime minister’s office. Bandar had his own CIA phone

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