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Introduction by Paul Thomas Chamberlin

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Introduction by Paul Thomas Chamberlin, Columbia University

In 2002, Douglas Little published *American Orientalism*—a seminal study of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East from 1945 to 2001.¹ It is difficult to imagine how Little’s timing could have been better. The September 11 attacks and the approaching U.S. invasion of Iraq positioned Little at the forefront of a surge of historical scholarship on U.S.-Middle East relations. *American Orientalism* became required reading for a new generation of historians puzzling over Washington’s fraught relationship with nations and peoples in the region. Fifteen years after its first publication, the book remains a perennial entry on syllabi and graduate reading lists and a starting point for any serious student of U.S. diplomatic history in the Middle East.

Now, with *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat*, Little has published his long-awaited follow-up. Like its predecessor, *Us versus Them* performs something of a balancing act in that it aims to reach scholars, students, and general readers. Most works in the subfield of recent U.S.-Middle East relations fall into one of four camps: scholarly monographs, journalistic and popular histories, textbooks, and polemics. Each type of work is crucial and there exist stellar examples in each category. But each set of books reaches a limited audience. *American Orientalism* and *Us versus Them* accomplish the rare feat of incorporating elements of all of the above camps. Eschewing the type of esoteric jargon that has become so prevalent in academic writing, Little speaks to lay readers and specialists alike and provides much-needed scholarly perspective on important and deeply contested issues. But make no mistake: *Us versus Them* it is a serious work of academic history—it contains over 700 footnotes—and it will surely shape the next generation of study of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Each of the reviewers finds much to praise in Little’s book. Terry Anderson and Lloyd Gardner—who have each written important surveys of recent U.S.-Middle East relations—offer positive assessments.² Anderson calls *Us versus Them* a “superb book” filled with “engaging prose and stimulating quotations,” although he wonders if Little may have been a bit too hard on Barack Obama and he wishes that the book’s final chapter had been more detailed. Gardner echoes this positive appraisal, writing that *Us versus Them* provides a “foundation for thinking about” the recent history and coming challenges of American entanglements in the Middle East. “It is a very timely book, but also one that should be read by those charged with making the decisions about how to use American power in the next decades.”

Jeffrey Byrne and Salim Yaqub also praise the book as a masterful work of synthesis. As Yaqub explains, “For a book covering U.S. foreign relations since the late 1980s, *Us Versus Them* is remarkably well researched.” Byrne adds that “Little is to be commended for bringing historical rigour to matters still overwhelmingly in the thrall of partisan agendas, and for doing so with readability and verve.” The book is ultimately, he explains, a “brave second draft of history.” But both Byrne and Yaqub express reservations about the book’s “us-versus-them” theme. Yaqub criticizes what he describes as a “rather thin conceptualization” of this

¹ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

² Terry Anderson, *Bush’s Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lloyd Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2008); Lloyd Gardner, *Three Kings: The Rise of an American Empire in the Middle East after World War II* (New York: New Press, 2009).

dynamic. He notes that there are many different varieties of this type of othering, with many different implications, and he explains that there are many different “thems.” Likewise, Yaqub wonders if there are perhaps times when such thinking may be both “unavoidable” and “inescapable.” Byrne, similarly, worries that the book is sometimes guilty of the “us-versus-them” thinking that it criticizes, such as when Little notes the religion of his Muslim hosts in Jordan but not that of his Israeli hosts in Tel Aviv. Likewise, as a European living in Canada, Byrne questions the salience of the book’s concept of “us.”

These reservations aside, the reviewers agree that Little has written a book of first-rate importance. And it is my sense that some of the reviewers’ scrutiny stems, at least in part, from this recognition that *Us versus Them* will surely serve as a starting point for future studies of U.S.-Middle East relations as scholars and students grapple with the many questions that Little has raised.

Participants:

Douglas Little is the Robert and Virginia Scotland Professor of History and International Relations at Clark University. He received his Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1978. Little’s latest book, *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* (University of North Carolina Press), appeared in 2016. He is currently completing research for a book on Ronald Reagan and the Third World, with special emphasis on the Middle East.

Paul Chamberlin is Associate Professor of History at Columbia University. He specializes in twentieth century international history with a focus on U.S. foreign relations and the Middle East. His first book, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford University Press, 2012), is an international history of the Palestinian liberation struggle. His next book, *Arc of Liberation: A History of the Cold War Bloodlands* is forthcoming with HarperCollins.

Terry H. Anderson, Professor of History and Cornerstone Faculty Fellow, Texas A&M University. Ph.D. Indiana University, 1978, under the direction of Robert H. Ferrell and Richard S. Kirkendall. Publications include *Bush’s Wars* (Oxford University Press, 2011). *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (Oxford University Press, 2004); *The Movement and The Sixties* (Oxford University Press, 1995); *A Flying Tiger’s Diary* (co-authored with Charles R. Bond, Jr.), (Texas A&M University Press, 1984); *The United States, Great Britain, and the Cold War, 1944-1947* (University of Missouri Press, 1981), and four editions of *The Sixties* (Pearson, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2011).

Jeffrey James Byrne is Associate Professor of History at the University of British Columbia. His work concerns postcolonial international history, especially in African and the Middle Eastern contexts. His first book, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order*, is published by Oxford University Press.

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam*, (W.W. Norton, 1988), and *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995). He has served as president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Affairs.

Salim Yaqub is Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Director of UCSB's Center for Cold War Studies and International History. He is the author of *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (University of North Carolina, 2004) and of several articles and book chapters on the history of U.S. foreign relations, the international politics of the Middle East, and Arab American political activism. His second book, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s*, was published by Cornell University Press in September 2016.

Review by Terry H. Anderson, Texas A&M University

“How was it,” Douglas Little asks, “that so many of ‘us’ had come to regard so many of ‘them’ [Islamists] as a menace to our own security and well-being?” (5). His book aims to provide some answers. In order to do that, Little “traces the evolution of U.S. national security policy across four administrations from the end of the Cold War through high noon in the war on terror and shows how the ‘Green Threat’ of radical Islam gradually replaced the ‘Red Threat’ of international communism in the mind of America” (11).

Little is a fine historian with a firm grip on modern U.S. foreign policy. His previous book, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002) ranked on the gold standard for a survey, and *Us versus Them* maintains a high standard, with some minor reservations, as will be discussed.

The author views President George H.W. Bush as a “classic Cold Warrior” who adapted to changing times after the demise of the USSR, a man who tried to establish a New World Order while maintaining United States’s priorities of Persian Gulf oil and Israeli security (11). President Bill Clinton was critical of the “us versus them” mentality and adopted an ambitious Middle East plan of “dual containment” toward Iraq and Iran, as his administration attempted to confront the growing threat from Islamic radicals (11-12). President George W. Bush rejected Clinton’s approach and adopted a stance to “flex more military muscle to show the world that America could still protect us from them.” While he adopted containment toward Russia and China, his administration “preferred to handle rogues like [Iraqi President] Saddam Hussein with a strategy straight out of the 1950s—rollback” (12). Instead, his Middle East policy “inadvertently enabled the new Green Threat of radical Islam to replace the old Red Threat of international communism” (12). Little admits that President Barack Obama had a “huge challenge” reversing the diplomatic fallout from his predecessor’s foreign policy and at first adopted a policy of “contagement” (13) which meant containing China while withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan and re-starting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. But the author contends that ‘contagement’ “proved to be a non-starter,” because it confused the governments in Baghdad and Kabul and did not re-start the Arab-Israeli peace process. After Arab Spring in 2011 the administration “relied more and more on Navy SEALs and CIA drones to combat Islamic radicals” (13).

Throughout the book Little nicely compares American contemporary views on Islam with its views during the late 1940s of the Soviet Union, and at times merges the themes. Former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich gave a speech in 2010 decrying Obama’s age of “appeasement,” charging that the President was soft on “stealth jihadis” who like previous communists aimed to destroy America. The Republican declared that the nation faced a crisis unsurpassed since the late 1940s when President Harry S. Truman began “developing what became NSC-68,” which Gingrich called “the most important single document in the Cold War” (229).

As in any book, some sections are a little weaker than others, and this reader noticed a couple of minor problems in the chapter on George W. Bush. Little writes that Bush was “known affectionately as ‘Dubya’ by his pals in the Lone Star State,” but that is off the mark (131). Maybe when George was a boy, but nobody called him Dubya in any main newspapers in Texas when he was governor or president. One exception was the late liberal satirist Molly Ivins, who wrote nationally and especially for the *Texas Observer* housed in Austin. Ivins skewered “Dubya” almost every week in her columns, and it was anything but affectionate. A

couple times Little refers to President Bush as “the historian” since he took such classes at Yale, but since the 1920s and until 2017 it would be difficult to find a president with less historical knowledge (169).

Nevertheless, Little is correct on Bush administration’s failed policies in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. The author demonstrates that the president was clueless, pontificating to GOP governors in September 2002 that “Afghanistan and Iraq will lead that part of the world to democracy. . . . They are going to be the catalyst to change the Middle East and the world” (161).

Concerning Obama, the author writes “Dubya’s successor was left to pick up the pieces after the attempt to export democracy at gunpoint backfired, but Barack Obama’s attempt to combine containment and engagement would find little favor in Middle America or the Middle East” (222). Perhaps, but what was the alternative for Obama? After Bush’s disastrous unnecessary war against Saddam Hussain, any president would have been faced with a lose-lose situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, indeed the entire Middle East. Bush left the presidency with historically low approval ratings, and no one on Main Street America was interested in the death of one more American soldier, especially as the nation was in economic crisis with the Great Recession, beginning in 2008. Moreover, all Obama did in Iraq was to uphold the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement that Bush and then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki signed in December 2008. It stipulated that all U.S. combat forces would be out of the country by the end of 2011. A different Iraqi government allowed the return of U.S. Special Forces advisers during the current Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS, conflict.

In the last full chapter, “The Obama Doctrine,” the reader is faced with the complexities of writing very recent history, ending in 2015. The text is often so fast-paced that it reads like one newspaper headline after another, from a whirl-wind tour of the Arab Spring in 2011, to an English-speaking ISIS executioner “Jihadi John,” to al-Shabab’s attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. More detail and explanation would have been helpful.

But these are minor quibbles for a superb book. Based on judicious research involving articles, books, primary documents from the National Security Archives, and numerous on-line sources, even Wikileaks—Douglas Little has written a book with engaging prose and stimulating quotations. It is filled with interesting surprises, such as the section labeled “The Metaphysics of Muslim-Hating in Contemporary America” (223-228). Here the author recounts anti-Muslim statements made by ‘conservatives’ such as Ann Coulter, describes counterterrorist television shows like “24,” novels by Tom Clancy’s *Against All Enemies* (2011), and similar video games like *Call of Duty*, all of which keep Americans paranoid about Muslims in general.

Little’s conclusion in *Us versus Them* is sound: “The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 may have freed most Americans from four decades of Cold War high anxiety, but twenty-five years later many had fallen under the spell of a new ideology at least as potent as anti-communism—Islamophobia—a powerful cocktail of political, racial, and cultural assumptions that signaled a shift from Code Red to Code Green, the color of Islam” (212).

Review by Jeffrey James Byrne, University of British Columbia

Douglas Little's *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* comes at an auspicious time in American politics. Little explains that his purpose is to trace the evolution of U.S. national security policy in the Middle East from the administration of George H.W. Bush to that of Obama in order to show that radical Islam replaced communism as a global, existential peril in the minds of American policymakers (11). This framework is an attractive one in the wake of President Donald Trump's election, which seems to confirm that America's domestic and foreign politics have come to revolve around a hostile preoccupation with 'Muslims' and 'Arabs' (these being poorly delineated or frequently misapplied labels) to a remarkable degree. Near the start of his introduction, Little notes that scholars have long recognized that the identification of a "negative reference group" is often vital to the creation of collective and national identities (5), and indeed this book is perhaps at its most compelling when it explicitly frames American hostility to Muslims as one contemporary expression of a national project founded on genocidal colonization and ethno-religious purifying conquest. In fact, this reader would have liked to have read more on that theme, and for it to have been presented as prologue rather than epilogue, coming as it does in the sixth and final chapter. Nevertheless, as a survey of American post-Cold War foreign policy in the Middle East, *Us versus Them* is a welcome and accessible introduction to a subject of great political and moral urgency, one that is well-suited in particular for undergraduate teaching.

That said, as a European teaching in Canada, I may not quite be in this book's target audience. Little explains that, "I have purposely written this book from the perspective of 'us,'" by whom he means Americans (14). The prose will surely be lively, relevant, and accessible to a young(ish) American audience, but as a consequence it is also perhaps somewhat exclusionary. *Us versus Them* presupposes a certain familiarity and perhaps also partisan investment in recent American politics, referring to Governor Mitt Romney, for example, as "the rich and smug management consultant" (207). On another occasion, Little writes that "Batting .300 was no more acceptable for Barack Obama than it had been for his predecessor ... because ... foreign policy was really more like football" (235). I confess that I have no idea what that means.

More problematic is the explicit and implicit definition of "us." While Little admirably explains that he is not writing about "them" because he thinks the problem in America's relations with the Muslim world lie mostly in America, this formulation still does not make allowance for the obvious fact that some Americans happen to be Muslim or of Muslim heritage. That is, while setting out to critique the essentialist narrative of 'America' and the 'Muslim world' as being somehow different and in tension, Little perhaps does not fully position himself outside of that paradigm. He opens the book with an anecdote about a visit to Jordan, during which he "sat down for tea with Jawad and Rana, a Muslim couple who were hosting two Clark University undergraduates" (7). It seems odd to specify his hosts' religion here, since that detail seems both unremarkable and irrelevant. In comparison, a similar anecdote from Israel that closes out the book does not specify his interlocutors' (presumably) Jewish identity (242). Nor does Christianity feature prominently in Little's analysis of American foreign policy. I do not wish to belabour the point, but there are real analytical consequences to this categorical capture. For example, maps at the beginning of the book use menacing black explosions to conflate such very different phenomena as the Iranian state and an insurgency in Algeria as manifestations of 'Radical Islam.' This rather sensationalistic illustration, which privileges 'Islam' above all other interpretive considerations, does a disservice to Little's nuanced and well-researched analysis.

Most of the chapters of the book present a chronological exploration of successive post-Cold War presidents' policies in the Middle East, culminating with Obama. This exploration is a useful and valuable contribution,

especially concerning the more recent years, for which *Us versus Them* serves as a brave second draft of history. Little is to be commended for taking on this challenge. In his reckoning, the Cold War continued to shape American policies in the Middle East long after the fall of the Soviet Union because presidents and policymakers were already profoundly—and perhaps irredeemably—conditioned by that paradigm. Or, in the case of the President George H.W. Bush, Little suggests, by the Second World War, so that he tended to portray Iraq leader Saddam Hussein as late-twentieth century Arab Adolf Hitler (72-77). Little's portrayal of Washington in the 1990s is, to some degree, that of city perplexed by why the Middle East did not seem to be conforming to the post-Cold War order and the narrative of American triumphalism. Little argues that successive American presidents pursued policies of containment, first towards uncooperative states like Iraq and Iran, and then toward the more nebulous problem of radical Islamist terrorism, in a manner reminiscent of their predecessors' approach to the perceived communist threat. The President George W. Bush then had the opportunity to pursue the 'rollback' that Cold War-era American politicians could only fantasize about. Obama, finally, attempted what Little dubs "contagement," (13)—a fusion of the frustrated engagement of the Clinton years with continued aggressive containment of Islamic terrorism and Iran. On the whole, he credits Clinton and Obama with a more nuanced and productive approach to the Middle East, in comparison with their Republican counterparts' simplistic "us versus them" thinking.

Perhaps the book's strongest material comes in the final chapter, "Revelations." Here, Little steps back from his analysis of recent diplomacy and high-level foreign policy-making in order to look at the longer historical and social contexts for American-Muslim/Arab relations. He delves into the history of American xenophobia, racial expansionism, and racial pathologies as prelude to America's engagement with the Middle East. There is some wonderful material in this chapter. Mark Twain said of Arabs that "[t]hey reminded me of much of Indians ... They sat in silence, and with tireless patience watched over every motion with that vile, uncomplaining impoliteness which is so truly Indian, and which makes a white man so nervous and uncomfortable and savage that he wants to exterminate the whole tribe" (218). In this way, Little fruitfully situates the anti-Muslim hysteria which consumed American society after the 11 September attack. Thus, the ominous and oddly antiquated name bestowed on the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is more comprehensible as an evocation of a fundamentally fearful colonial past. Another remarkable anecdote featured here, for example, is that at the onset to Hurricane Katrina in September 2005, the DHS warned law enforcement agencies in the Gulf Coast region to be alert for "possible [Muslim] terrorist exploitation" of the storm (226). From the same hysterical, wholly unrealistic view of the world spring fears of Al Qaeda cooperating with Mexican drug cartels, which have found their apotheosis in Trump's notorious wall. All in all, by providing so much useful historical, social, and cultural context for Little's analysis of policy-making, this chapter is a very valuable addition to the book. I do think it ought to have been the first chapter, rather than last.

On the whole, *Us versus Them* demonstrates the value of exploring very recent history of immediate political relevance, even if it does not entirely escape some of the pitfalls of the endeavour. As indicated above, I would have preferred greater distance from the paradigm being interrogated. Nevertheless, Little is to be commended for bringing historical rigour to matters still overwhelmingly in the thrall of partisan agendas, and for doing so with readability and verve.

Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University, Emeritus

At the end of the Cold War it was contended that history had confirmed America's destiny. How could it be otherwise? The evil empire President Ronald Reagan had described was no more. Its string of satellite regimes had all gurgled down the drain and Eastern Europe was ready for the cleansing influence of the West. There were no more ideological rivals to liberal capitalism, nor was there left any military rival worthy of the name. True, there were some matters to be attended to, first in Panama, where a one-time ally in the old days, military dictator Manuel Noriega, was getting too big for his britches, and then in the Middle East, there was Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, whose aspirations had sometimes coincided with American interests in the past, but, now, with the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, he had become a serious obstacle to the final realization of a New World Order.

President George H.W. Bush explained what was at stake in a speech to a joint session of Congress on 11 September 1990. Using end-of-history images, the President asserted that in his meetings with Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev they had developed a shared vision of the future: "A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor. Today that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known."¹

If the United States accepted its responsibility to lead in "this first assault on the new world," if it met "this first test of our mettle," Bush assured the legislators, that birth was assured. One looks back now amazed at such naïveté. Hussein was quickly driven out of Kuwait but the elusive path to peace only led deeper into a maze. Even the date of Bush's speech, September 11, became a grim reminder of the false hopes entertained by end of history theorists and political leaders. Eleven years later to the day, the worst attack ever on the United States—surpassing even Pearl Harbor in shock value—occurred on a bright sunny morning without a cloud in the sky.

American military forces once again found it an easy task to drive the Taliban out of Kabul into the Afghan mountains. But a new false narrative of Saddam Hussein's ultimate responsibility for the attack and his possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction produced the ultimate American response. This time the Iraqi leader was removed, and the dream of a New World Order rescued. While President George W. Bush watched Saddam Hussein's statue being toppled by crowds in Baghdad, it soon became apparent after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that Hussein's phantom Weapons of Mass Destruction concealed a far greater danger under the wreckage of 'Shock and Awe.'

When Hussein fled Baghdad in an attempt to escape George W. Bush's wrath these forces below erupted in a violent upheaval across what we call the Middle East.

Efforts even to find a suitable way to categorize the new war(s) have failed. We call them 'The Global War on Terrorism,' or 'The Great War on Terrorism.' We have almost run out of names for America's enemies. New ones pop up almost daily in newspaper reports. Some want to simplify the matter. Call the enemy 'Radical Islam.' So far that has not become generally accepted. There is a growing consensus, it would seem, to employ ISIS (Islamic State in Syria) as a sort of solution to the problem of pinning down the enemy by giving it a

¹ "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress," 11 September 1990, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-3425>.

name—the first step, presumably, in achieving victory. Douglas Little suggests how hard that will be in the title of his new book, *Us Versus Them*.

When Hussein attacked Kuwait in 1990, accusing the sheikdom of stealing oil from his land, George H.W. Bush compared him to Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler seeking to annex the Sudetenland or Austria. He also used that comparison so as to highlight the general depravity of his regime supporting his personal ambitions. In doing so, he was choosing one of two over-arching narratives about the political development (or absence thereof) of the Middle East. It was easily recognized as the Wilsonian affirmation of a universal standard that all nations are aiming in the same direction, that their peoples believe deep down in the same inalienable human rights as outlined in the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and are blocked from achieving these goals only by an evil individual with a supporting oligarchy. The other narrative holds that we face a genuine clash of civilizations, and that the current struggle is no less than a new Hundred Years War like the religious and political upheavals that ended Mediaeval Europe.

General Anthony Zinni, who headed the U.S. Central Command in the early years of the post-Cold War era recalled that American political leaders had missed the “emerging turmoil in Islam.” It was an historical event, he recalled later, “with political and religious consequences that will likely surpass those of the Protestant Reformation.” (52) Zinni’s comment should not be taken, however, to mean that he endorsed the ‘war of civilizations’ narrative, but rather that simply eliminating an evil leader by military means would not bring a lasting solution to any of the problems confronting the United States—whether in Iraq, Libya, or Syria.

The Wilson narrative actually began with that president’s “Fourteen Points” manifesto at the end of the (then) Great War. In Point Twelve, President Wilson decreed that ‘other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.’ What resulted was far short of Wilson’s pledge, the Mandate System, whereby the colonial powers Britain and France essentially divided up the Middle East, with a bow toward Wilsonian principles by installing comprador governments in the new capitals.

After World War II, the United States moved to change that situation, beginning with John Foster Dulles’s efforts to shape the Egyptian revolutionary regime headed by Colonel Gamal Nasser into the first Arab success story. The results were not so good, but even so the Wilsonian narrative survived. American policy developed after 1956 as an effort to straddle the two narratives. Little’s book is particularly instructive in the development of an attempted synthesis immediately after 9/11. The war on terror, the new president told a very receptive listener, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, would quite likely target people beyond al-Qaeda and the Taliban. “It’ll be like circles coming from pebbles dropped in the water. The next step is to look at other countries, including Iraq.” (146) Then, a few days later, he expanded the thought in a speech to Congress on 20 September 2001, declaring now that the terrorist bent groups like al-Qaeda, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, were all “traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect to hijack Islam itself.” They were all doomed because “they follow in the path of fascism and Naziism and totalitarianism,” and would end up in “history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies.” “They hate our freedom—our freedom of religion, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, [and] our freedom to vote.” (146)

By assigning such beliefs broadsides to movements across the entire area, and talking about an Axis of Evil, Bush made it easier for Americans to support his policies based on recognizable threats to the nation from the past. Whether that would help in the post-historical era was an untested proposition. Bush was essentially

facilitating an *Us Versus Them* definition of world events that Little points out has permeated American politics and culture for nearly two decades.

President Barack Obama attempted a re-set of cultural attitudes (both in the Middle East and at home) in his major speech in Cairo in June 2009. “I’ve come here,” he told the cheering crowd at Cairo University, “to seek a new beginning . . . based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition” (181). He promised to leave Iraq to the Iraqis, to devote U.S. forces to less killing and more nation building in Afghanistan, and to work for peace in the Holy Land. He had originally launched his political career, as Little notes, by distinguishing between the ‘war of choice,’ Iraq, and the ‘war of necessity,’ Afghanistan. But the distinction had almost become meaningless even as he voiced such hopes. Moreover, what followed the ‘Arab Spring’ seemed to justify caution—according to the old saying—in making wishes, because they might come true.

Perhaps the strongest signal of the dilemma he faced was not the Cairo speech, but the appointment of General David Petraeus—the formulator of the surge strategy that calmed down Iraq long enough to extricate American troops—to head a mini surge in Afghanistan. At West Point Obama announced that the 30,000 men he was sending to Afghanistan would not be a forerunner of still greater forces to come. The cadet audience he addressed that night, a West Point faculty member told me, seemed strangely unmoved by anything he said.² But why should they? By now, one could argue, presidential statements about escalations or reductions had little meaning in an era when war was the natural state of being.

The whole picture was on display in Obama’s frustration about what to do about Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya. “If we don’t act,” he instructed his advisers on 15 March 2011, “it will have consequences for US credibility and leadership, consequences for the Arab Spring, and consequences for the international community.” (200) It is striking how similar these words are to President George H.W. Bush’s impassioned speech to Congress on 11 September 1990 promising the birth of a new age.

Despite the NATO ‘leadership’ in staging the aerial war that brought down the Libyan dictator, the situation in Libya deteriorated—thus again frustrating Wilsonian hopes that removing the bad guys would lead the spread of democracy. This recalls George Bush’s 2001 incorrect assurance to Tony Blair that the war on terror would be like pebbles falling in water causing ripples that spreads out democratic spirits. Little recommends that there are in fact lessons from the Cold War that can be used to break the hold of Islamophobia that holds the United States in thrall. Containment brought victory—not the victory of arms alone, but of patience and bold leadership to seize upon opportunities to go beyond the largely self-created images of *Us Versus Them*.

When he took office, Obama turned to Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan for ideas about how to wage war—a just war in Western theological terms. One method—indeed one of the most important changes in the waging of the war across national borders—was the increased use of drones to eliminate instigators of terrorist attacks. Fittingly, this was all foretold in a speech candidate Obama gave at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., on 1 August 2007. It was time to begin a new page in the war on terror, he asserted, following terrorists to their lairs out on the “wild frontier of our globalized world... there are wind-swept deserts and cave-dotted mountains. There are

² The comment was made to me the morning after the speech, 4 December 2009.

tribes that see borders as nothing more than lines on a map, and governments as forces that come and go. There are blood ties deeper than alliances of convenience, and pockets of extremism that follow religion to violence. It's a tough place.”³

As so often in the past, Americans would rely on technology (in this case drones) in an effort to straighten out tangled political narratives. It was a conservative radio ranter, Rush Limbaugh, who pointed out where that path led without really meaning to in the aftermath of the drone raid that killed an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, who had been accused of instigating terrorist attacks that had killed soldiers in Texas. Obama had acted without a court order, let alone a trial for treason. Mocked Limbaugh, “Barack Obama is demanding the right to kill American citizens without making his case to a judge, as long as he thinks the American in question is in an upper tier of operations of Al-Qaeda or a related group. You can kill him, but we can't waterboard him.” (229)

Douglas Little has provided a foundation for thinking about all these questions. It is a very timely book, but also one that should be read by those charged with making the decisions about how to use American power in the next decades.

³ “Obama’s Speech at Woodrow Wilson Center,” 1 August 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/elections/obamas-speech-woodrow-wilson-center/p13974>. This speech is one of the most important clues to what Obama would do as president, and needs to be read in full as it contains much about the future president’s interest in counterinsurgency as well as drone warfare.

Review by Salim Yaqub, University of California, Santa Barbara

“Today, we are not so sure who the [sic] they are, but we know they’re there.” So said Texas Governor George W. Bush during his 2000 run for president, as Douglas Little recounts in his smart and lively book, *Us Versus Them* (132). Something of a cross between a Zen koan and a tongue twister, Bush’s remark hints at the protean nature of Americans’ conception of their mortal enemies. Even if everyone does know “who the they are” at the moment, there’s just no telling where the next “they” will come from.

Claims of American exceptionalism should be greeted with skepticism, but there *is* something peculiar about the ever-shifting nature of the perils that have, through the ages, stalked the American imagination. Little helpfully depicts them as a color-coded procession: the “red threat” of American Indian resistance, the “black threat” of feared slave rebellions, the “yellow peril” of Asian immigration, the “brown threat” of Nazism, another “red threat” of Communism (15-16). Little does not really explore why the threat kept changing, but the answer seems to lie in the nation’s good fortune—or, to be more precise, the good fortune of the dominant groups that got to define the public threats. For in time each of those perils was vanquished, avoided, or shown to have been exaggerated, and Americans had the luxury of moving on to the next peril. The latest in the series, the “green threat” of radical Islam, now roils the nation. Hopefully it, too, will pass, though when and how this might happen is anyone’s guess. In the meantime, Little offers surefooted guidance though the origins and unfolding of this tumultuous new normal.

The bulk of Little’s book covers the three decades since the Cold War entered its terminal phase, an outcome arguably facilitated by a Western containment doctrine that assumed the barrenness and immorality of Communist ideology. Although U.S. leaders in the late 1980s had reason to feel vindicated in their “us-versus-them” approach, the complexities of the dawning post-Cold War era invited fresh thinking. “American policy makers,” Little writes, “would begin to ask themselves: Was there a way to move beyond containment and transcend the us-versus-them paradigm to seize new opportunities and build a new world order while avoiding new dangers?” In their encounters with radical Islam, Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all faced this central question. Each found “there was no easy answer” (52). (Little published his monograph while Obama was still in office, so the attitudes and policies of Donald Trump—with which the author, no doubt, would have had a field day—alas fall outside of the purview of the book.)

Of the four presidents under review, Bush the elder had the least interaction with radical Islam. He was in office for just one term, much of it preoccupied with ending the Cold War. Bush’s next three successors—each serving two terms and fully inhabiting the post-Cold War era—were far more concerned with the “green threat.” Little argues that the two Democrats, Clinton and Obama, did sincerely try to move beyond “the us-versus-them paradigm” when dealing with the Islamic world. Both leaders, however, were frustrated in their efforts to resolve Middle Eastern disputes diplomatically and often saw no acceptable alternative to using force in the region.

The second President Bush—‘Dubya,’ as he was known—placed little stock in diplomacy to begin with, displaying what Little calls “a muscular sense of self-righteousness and a willingness to shoot first and ask questions later” (172). Bush’s stridency was matched only by his ineptitude. Obsessed with achieving “regime change” in Iraq, he was all too slow to detect the gathering threat posed by the al-Qa‘ida network and, after the network struck on 9/11 and after U.S. forces dislodged the attackers from their bases in Afghanistan, all

too quick to lose interest in consolidating that achievement and to resume his disastrous vendetta against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Bush's underlying error, Little writes, was to cling to outmoded geopolitical thinking: "like the old us-versus-them paradigm that had fueled the Red Scare at the height of the Cold War, Dubya's mantra—'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists'—would set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy that guaranteed only greater insecurity and perpetual war" (171). In Little's treatment, as in real life, Bush's blunders amply overshadow the accomplishments of his more prudent predecessors and immediate successor.

For a book covering U.S. foreign relations since the late 1980s, *Us Versus Them* is remarkably well researched. Denied the rich primary-source collections available to scholars exploring earlier eras—in presidential libraries, the National Archives, and the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series—Little has made excellent use of journalistic accounts, memoirs, and once-secret documents posted to Internet collections like the National Security Archive, Declassified Documents Reference System, and (the pre-Trumpian) Wikileaks. Such sources afford intimate glimpses of U.S. government deliberations that are rarely seen in works of contemporary history. For this, we must ultimately thank some of the students in Little's undergraduate seminar, who, the author writes, "ignored my warning that there were too few primary sources to do real research on the U.S. response to radical Islam since 1989 and proceeded to write excellent papers on the Clinton and Bush administrations" (xi). We can be doubly grateful that Little followed his students' example and conducted his own dogged excavation of the buried and scattered evidence, which he has now pulled together in this vivid account featuring sharp insights, skillful staging, and supple prose.

Indeed, when the subject is this grim, it is refreshing to encounter some sly humor, and Little, characteristically, does not disappoint. He describes Donald Rumsfeld, who served two non-consecutive stints as Secretary of Defense, as "the Grover Cleveland of the Pentagon" (134). He calls the Central Asian strongmen Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov "a Turkmen thug with a long name and a short fuse" (170). In the wake of 9/11, when Pakistani scientists' trafficking in "loose nukes" had ceased to be tolerable, CIA Director George Tenet hastened to Islamabad for "a come-to-Jesus talk with President Pervez Musharraf" (150). At a debate during the 2000 Republican primary campaign, a race distinguished by George W. Bush's flailing attempts at "us-versus-them" rhetoric, Senator John McCain offered a crisper rendition of the Manichaean view. "Dubya, who truly could not have said it better himself, nodded in agreement" (132).

I do have one substantive quibble with Little's treatment, concerning its rather thin conceptualization of "us-versus-them" thinking. (If the following critique goes on at some length, this is less because it merits so much verbiage than because I have not succeeded in stating it more succinctly.) The general thrust of Little's argument—conveyed explicitly in some places and implicitly in others—is that "us-versus-them" approaches are wrongheaded and self-defeating. While this is an intuitively appealing notion, it is not, in my view, sufficient by itself to sustain a book-length study. The argument needs sturdier underpinnings: namely, a more systematic discussion of the different forms that "us-versus-them" thinking can take, and a more discerning assessment of the benefits and pitfalls of such partisan outlooks.

The variations are endless, but two distinct modes of "us-versus-them" thinking have been especially prominent in U.S. interactions with the Muslim world, and those two patterns are conceptual opposites. The first mode assumes that "they" are so different from "us" as to be undeserving of the rights, privileges, and considerations that Westerners take for granted. The second holds that they are so *similar* to us that they can and should be induced to adopt our way of life. Little disapprovingly recounts instances in which each of these modes has operated, without noting the crucial difference between them.

Exemplifying the first mode is the current of Islamophobia that has coursed through American politics since 9/11, perpetuating the notion that Islamic cultures are fundamentally alien, and inferior, to their Judeo-Christian counterparts. Occasionally, American leaders have explicitly validated such views, as when General Jerry Boykin, a counterterrorism officer, notoriously said of a Somali warlord, “my God was a real God, and his was an idol.” Denigrating Islam in this way, Little sensibly comments, “only invites Islamic radicals to return the favor” (245).

Yet the author is equally critical of U.S. leaders who have downplayed cultural differences and imagined that Western-style democracy could easily take root in Muslim societies. That Little sees this assumption, too, as a species of “us-versus-them” thinking is evident in the following passage, on the infamous “Mission Accomplished” speech that George W. Bush delivered in May 2003, just weeks after launching the Iraq War:

“Everywhere that freedom arrives, humanity rejoices.” [Bush] declared, “and everywhere that freedom stirs, let tyrants fear.” . . . In this latest conflict between us and them, he implied, preventive war against Iraq was merely the most compelling way we could demonstrate that they would pay a huge price for threatening the United States. The Bush administration was about to discover, however, that exporting democracy at gunpoint to the Muslim world could prove quite costly to America as well (163-164).

Here, too, Little’s criticism hits the mark, but the “them” in this instance, Muslim tyrants, bears little resemblance to the “them” in the previous one, Muslim society as a whole. Taken too far, both forms of “us-versus-them” thinking can lead to disaster. Yet the two modes are hardly the same and should not be lumped together.

And is an “us-versus-them” outlook always a bad thing? Consider the following passage, in which Little notes that neoconservatives in Dubya’s administration “employed us-versus-them rhetoric to brand Saddam Hussein as the most serious threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East. White House counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke, a holdover from the Clinton years, begged to differ and insisted that Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda were far more dangerous” (139). Or this observation:

Bush and his Vulcan [i.e., hawkish] advisers had entered office locked into an us-versus-them view of the world in which “they” were no longer Soviet-backed subversives but rather rogue states like North Korea and Iraq, which “we” must prevent from acquiring WMDs [weapons of mass destruction] and ballistic missiles at all cost. In a colossal failure of imagination, the White House had let Saddam Hussein become its White Whale, distracting policy makers from a far graver danger lurking high in the mountains of Southwest Asia (145).

In each of these passages, it appears at first glance that Little is decrying “us-versus-them” thinking altogether. But upon closer inspection a different argument emerges from the text: that Bush and his advisers had their eye on the wrong “them”; they fixated on Saddam when they should have gone after Osama. This latter critique is wholly persuasive, but—precisely for that reason—it highlights the shortcomings of the book’s overall framework. At least in some instances, and at least up to a point, an “us-versus-them” approach is not only unavoidable but necessary. What *are* those instances, and where does that point lie? As long as Little is offering policy prescriptions (and he does offer them, in general terms), it would be helpful if he ventured answers to these questions.

The inescapability of “us-versus-them” thinking comes up again (albeit only by omission) in the book’s closing pages, where Little provides his above-mentioned recommendations. “[L]eaders on both sides of the us-versus-them divide,” he writes, “must be willing to transcend ideological stereotypes, defy conventional wisdom, and take risks for peace” (244). To demonstrate that such accommodation is possible, Little cites the negotiations leading to the Iran nuclear deal (which apparently had not been concluded when he submitted his book for publication). There are plenty of other Islamist actors with which the United States has, directly or indirectly, succeeded in doing business: Hamas, Hezbollah, the governments of Turkey, Sudan, and, for a time, Egypt. But when it comes to U.S. relations with al-Qa‘ida, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, and similarly apocalyptic groups, “risks for peace” on either side are much harder to imagine. Again, it would be helpful to have clearer guidance on when, where, and with which adversaries the United States could realistically transcend “the us-versus-them paradigm,” and in what circumstances it should simply aim to put the bad guys out of business.

While I wish Little had more fully explored such distinctions, I have to admire the skill, perceptiveness, resourcefulness, and verve with which he recreates U.S. interactions with radical Islam and illuminates their recent origins. *Us Versus Them* is a major contribution to historical scholarship on the subject, one that will fascinate, enlighten, provoke, and at times delight readers of all levels and persuasions.

Author's Response by Douglas Little, Clark University

As I prepared my response to this H-Diplo Roundtable on *Us versus Them*, I was struck by a paradox. While more and more is being written these days about contemporary U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, the man presently in the Oval Office and his supporters seem to be reading less and less about anything. At a time when the 'Twittersphere' is littered with 'fake news' and Internet trolls regularly trash books on Amazon.com, I am particularly grateful that Thomas Maddux was able to round up four reviewers who have read what I have written not only with a sympathetic ear but also with a critical eye.

I set out to write a relatively brief account of the evolution of American national security strategy and the rise of Islamophobia since 1989 that was readable, provocative, and relevant. Along the way, I hoped to answer three questions: What became of the doctrine of containment during the quarter century after the fall of the Berlin Wall? Did Orientalist stereotypes about Muslims affect U.S. policymakers after the Cold War? Can one write good diplomatic history based on, among other things, kiss-and-tell memoirs, classified documents pirated by Al-Jazeera and Wikileaks, and images propagated by pulp fiction, B-movies, and video games?

I am pleased that all four reviewers found my narrative to be, for the most part, a 'good read.' Like Lloyd Gardner in *The Long Road to Baghdad*,¹ I have attributed America's deepening involvement in the Muslim world to American exceptionalism dating from Puritan leader John Winthrop, a rhetorical commitment to self-determination dating from President Woodrow Wilson, and a compulsion to employ economic leverage and military muscle to dominate Asians, Africans, and Arabs dating from the dawn of the Cold War. Weary of theory, I let the policymakers tell their story in their own words, even if they include f-bombs. Although my intended audience was indeed principally American, not British or Canadian, I take Jeffrey Byrne's point that my sports analogies might have been more inclusive—not merely baseball and football, but also soccer and hockey. (I do draw the line at cricket, however.)

Beyond a few stylistic quibbles, the reviewers have raised three substantive matters about my interpretive framework. Byrne thinks that I have devoted too much attention to "us" and not enough to "them." He rightly notes that Islam is a complex religion riven by sectarian rivalries and that political Islam, or 'Islamism,' means very different things depending on whether one looks at, say, Egypt or Iran. Throughout the text and in the maps, I have employed the synecdoche 'Radical Islam' not because I am unaware of this complexity but rather because U.S. policymakers typically dumped groups as diverse as Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah into the same basket of deplorables. To put this another way, just as Cold Warriors drew few distinctions among Russian, Chinese, or Vietnamese communists and regarded 'the Sino-Soviet Bloc' as a monolithic threat during the 1950s and 1960s, so too did national security managers during the 1990s and beyond lump together very disparate groups of Islamic extremists. In each case, the result was the same. The United States found itself trapped in a military quagmire, first on the Mekong and later on the Euphrates. I do agree, however, that I might have peered a little more closely inside the 'black box' of anti-

¹ Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2010).

American regimes and movements in the Middle East, as Byrne has done in his splendid new book on Algeria, *The Mecca of Revolution*.²

Salim Yaqub wishes I had thought a little harder about my “us versus them” framework in order to determine whether or not there were occasions where this type of thinking is “not only unavoidable but necessary.” I began to address this question in my concluding chapter on Islamophobia, where I have drawn parallels between Reinhold Niebuhr’s ironic interpretation of American relations with the Soviet Union in the age of Truman and the demonization of the ‘Islamic Other’ in the age of Trump. As President Barack Obama reminded us when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2009, there is evil in the world, and sometimes the power of ideas must be supplemented by armed force. The strategies that the four post-Cold War administrations adopted to address what I’ve called “the Green Threat”—George H.W. Bush’s “Containment Plus,” Bill Clinton’s “Dual Containment,” George W. Bush’s “Rogue State Rollback,” and Obama’s “Contagement”—were governed by the “us versus them” paradigm. The trick was to avoid targeting the ‘wrong them’ and falling victim to the ‘Captain Ahab syndrome,’ as Clinton did in Somalia, as ‘Dubya’ did in Iraq, and as Obama may have done in Syria. As Yaqub has shown in his must-read new book *Imperfect Strangers*, U.S. officials have been trying to distinguish between ‘Good Arabs’ and ‘Bad Arabs’ since the 1970s.³ With the Trump administration relying on a Muslim ban, cruise missiles, and bellicose diplomacy to protect us from them, steering between friendly tyrants like Abdel Fatah el-Sisi in Cairo and Islamic extremists like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Raqqa has never been more important—or more difficult.

Like the students in my research seminar, Terry Anderson wonders whether I have been too hard on Barack Obama. After all, the forty-fourth president inherited huge messes in the Middle East and Central Asia from George W. Bush and departed the Oval Office in January 2017 with many fewer GI’s in harm’s way than eight years earlier. Reflecting on Bush’s “shoot first and ask questions later” approach that Anderson described in such painful detail in *Bush’s Wars*,⁴ there is no question that Team Obama was far better informed, far more cautious, and far less ideological than the team of ‘Vulcans’ who launched the Global War on Terror after 9/11. Nevertheless, I think that Obama underestimated how difficult it would be to implement ‘contagement’—engagement plus containment—in his dealings with China, Iran, and radical Arab states while overestimating his ability to control the revolutions of rising expectations that erupted from Tunisia to Bahrain in early 2013. To be sure, the Obama administration’s reliance on drone strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen held U.S. casualties to a minimum and may have averted terrorist attacks inside the United States in the short run. Over the long haul, however, the ‘collateral damage’ inflicted on innocent civilians from the Hindu Kush to the badlands of southwest Arabia seems certain to fan the fires of anti-Americanism and lend credence to the claims of Islamic extremists that Muslim lives do not matter in the eyes of Uncle Sam.

² Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.—Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

⁴ Terry H. Anderson, *Bush’s Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

I completed *Us Versus Them* in June 2015, just a few days after Donald Trump stepped off the escalator in Trump Tower, declared that he was destined to become the next commander-in-chief, and sketched out a foreign policy that sounded to me like ‘us versus them’ on steroids. Two years later, militarism, xenophobia, and braggadocio hold sway at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, where the forty-fifth president is tweeting out a message familiar to anyone who came of age during the Cold War: ‘They’re out to get us.’ Neither I nor the other four participants in this roundtable would be surprised if Netflix were to announce a new series called “Green Is the New Red.”