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"A Sword with Two Edges": *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and the End of Empire

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In their 2006 "Quadrennial Defense Review Report" the United States Department of Defense outlined strategies for the "long war" they planned in the Middle East. The key to success, the report suggested, was the "ability to work with and through partners, to operate clandestinely and to sustain a persistent but low-visibility presence" ("Quadrennial Defense" 11). The authors had to reach a long way back to find examples of the tactics they sought to promote, and the illustration most readily to hand came from British rather than American history. They stated that

> One historical example […] comes from the Arab revolt in 1917 in a distant theater of the First World War, when British Colonel T. E. Lawrence and a group of lightly armed Bedouin tribesmen seized the Ottoman port city of Aqaba (11).

The previous year it was reported that the Pentagon had emailed passages from Lawrence's writings, including his memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, to senior officers serving in Iraq (Poole 15). Particular status was given to Lawrence's "27 Articles," his 1917 guide to "handling Arabs." In 2006 the full document was posted on the website of the U.S. Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, under the heading "Important Reference Material." Frequent references to Lawrence and the Arab Revolt can also be found in the 2006 "Counterinsurgency Field Manual" which was distributed to the US Army and Marine Corps in Iraq. T. E. Lawrence's appeal at this point in America's history requires little explanation. He was a white man who could apparently inspire and command Arab armies for the benefit of an occupying Western power. On the other hand, and in an unacknowledged and unsettling irony, his interventions ultimately failed to bring stability to the region. Indeed, the territorial settlement that followed the Arab Revolt

at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, where Lawrence was also an active delegate, continues to loom large in Middle Eastern affairs.

In fact, the affinity between Lawrence and American military culture has a long history, particularly in relation to the covert international operations of the CIA. Edward Lansdale, an influential shaper of CIA strategy during the Vietnam War, was known as "America's latter-day T.E. Lawrence of Southeast Asia" (Dean 38). Similarly, William Colby, Director of the CIA in the early 1970s, regarded Lawrence's memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922) as his "political advice manual" (Prados 11). The CIA Counter-Terrorism operative Duane Clarridge, best known for his involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, has said that one strategy endorsed by the agency was known as the "Lawrence of Arabia school of management" (57). Most recently, David Petraeus, briefly the Director of the CIA and the major contributor to the "Counterinsurgency Field Manual," drew explicit parallels between Lawrence's purported leadership of the Arab army and his own attempts to organize his "Iraqi partners" following the US invasion (Broadwell 194-195). The myths surrounding Lawrence appear to be well-established within the operational culture of the CIA, perhaps offering the material to imagine America's interventions in the Third World in a heroic or even romantic light.

Although Lawrence was a British soldier and ostensibly an agent of the British Empire, the myths cultivated around him were Anglo-American in origin and were appropriated by both national cultures. It seems fitting, then, that the defining moment in Lawrence's post-World War II profile should have been David Lean's Anglo-American biopic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). A thoroughly transatlantic co-production, the film was produced by an American, directed by a Briton, and the screenplay was initially penned by an American (Michael Wilson) and subsequently by a Briton (Robert Bolt). The economic impetus for the film came from Columbia Pictures but it met the criteria to be registered as a British film and thus to qualify for subsidy (Stubbs 8-9). This article examines the emergence of the Lawrence myth and its manifestation in *Lawrence of Arabia* in relation to American and British foreign policy during the Cold War period. Through a close examination of *Lawrence of Arabia* and the discourses generated by its reception, I discuss the political significance of the film in the context of decolonization and subsequent British and American engagements in the Middle East.

Forging the Legend

T. E. Lawrence was introduced to the public by Lowell Thomas, an American war correspondent who reported the British campaign against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine during the Great War. He had been granted privileged access to military operations by the British Foreign Office on the recommendation of the American Secretary of State, as the British wanted to increase coverage of the Arab Revolt, which was regarded at the time as a sideshow to the main European theater of war. The American government, on the other hand, sought positive reporting to stimulate public support for a war they had entered in the face of strong domestic resistance (Hodson 11-25).

Positive reporting was certainly what they got. Thomas transformed his reports into a lecture or "travelogue" entitled "With Allenby in Palestine and the Conquest of Holy Arabia." Although Lawrence's story (including the attack on Aqaba and the capture of Damascus) dominated the second half of the lecture, Thomas foregrounded the better-known name of General Allenby. After a seven-week run in New York from March 1919, Thomas transferred the lecture to the Royal Opera House in London; sponsored by the English Speaking Union and heralded as "America's Tribute to British Valour," it was delivered twice daily for six months (Hodson 30-31). When Thomas relocated from the Royal Opera House to the Royal Albert Hall later in 1919, the travelogue incorporated 240 lantern slides, 30 films shot on location in Arabia, an orchestra performing live, the burning of incense and even performances by veiled dancers. Between 1919 and 1923, Thomas's lecture was performed over 4,000 times to an estimated four million people internationally (Hodson 28-30).

The most popular section with audiences proved to be that concerning T. E. Lawrence, prompting Thomas to append the words "With Lawrence in Arabia" to his original title. Thomas exaggerated Lawrence's role in the Arab Revolt, declaring him to be "a man who will be blazoned on the romantic pages of history with Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, Lord Clive, Chinese Gordon and Kitchener of Khartoum" (qtd. Hodson 35). Quite suddenly, Lawrence found himself a major celebrity. The title "Lawrence of Arabia" began to circulate, an appellation that echoed Clive of India, Rhodes of Africa and Scott of the Antarctic among others, implying a possessive affinity between the man and the scene of

his heroism. Thomas was also responsible for writing the first biography of Lawrence, entitled *With Lawrence in Arabia* and published in 1924. Thomas represented Lawrence as a youthful, inspirational leader involved in derring-do adventures against an exotic backdrop and presented him as the prime mover in the Arab Revolt; and a romantic outsider, an alien presence in both British and Arab cultures. Frequent references were made to Lawrence's youth, intellectualism and even his effeminacy (Dawson 187). This alienation is perhaps most vividly apparent in Lawrence's mimicking an Arab, a transformation registered by his adoption of Arab dress. This might have seemed transgressive in a culture where racial differences were clearly delineated, but Lawrence's superiority to the Arabs as a leader and a soldier was never in doubt.

Although Thomas's lectures had found their largest audience in Britain, the subsequent dissemination of the myth also made Lawrence popular in America. In 1926, the *New York Times* wrote: "[I]n the realm of high adventure undertaken at great risk for great ends there is no figure today more romantic and mysterious than that of Lawrence of Arabia" (Savage 3). Although an agent of the British Empire, he was also a rebel and, in Thomas's construction at least, he was committed to leading the Arab people to freedom and independence. The Lawrence myth also corresponds to the model of the imperial adventurer that was disseminated in Hollywood cinema throughout the 1920s and 1930s, itself a variation on the Western film.[1] Richard Slotkin's description of the Hollywood archetypal imperial hero seems remarkably congruent with the Lawrence myth:

> A soldier who knows the natives well enough almost (or actually) to pass for one – a man who straddles the border between savagery and civilization, fanaticism and religion, brown and white, us and them (226).

Although America had no direct involvement in the Arabian campaign during the Great War, their political, military and economic investments in the Middle East grew exponentially in the years that followed. In this context Lawrence became a figure in whom these national interests could be registered and historicized.

1 For more on the Hollywood cycle of British Empire films see Chapman and Cull 33-50.

The accepted image of Lawrence as an imperial hero was first contested by Lawrence himself in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Heroism no longer comes easily to Lawrence in this new narrative, but has to be struggled for and is sustained only through extraordinary will-power (Dawson 198). The memoir added two significant dimensions to the Lawrence myth. First, Lawrence claims that while he was held prisoner by Ottoman soldiers in Deraa, he had been beaten and raped. Lawrence's response was ambiguous, perhaps masochistic, as he described how he experienced "a delicious warmth, probably sexual, […] swelling through me" (254). According to Dawson, the incident "breaks Lawrence's will, and so throws into crisis the system of values upon which his masculinity depends" (199). Lawrence observes at the end of the chapter that after "that night the citadel of my integrity had been irrevocably lost" (256).[2] Later on *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* presents Lawrence's account of the Arab massacre of Ottoman troops at Tafas: enraged by the Ottoman assault on an Arab village, the Bedouin army that Lawrence commanded made an immediate retaliation. Lawrence's description is vivid and puts him at the center of the violence: "we killed and killed, even blowing in the heads of the fallen and of the animals; as though their death and running blood could slake our agony" (654). As a consequence, Lawrence's entry into Damascus just a few pages later assumes a far less triumphant tone than in Thomas' version. But for all its efforts to complicate notions of Lawrence's heroism, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* did little to dispel the manifestly imperialist aspects of the Lawrence myth. Edward Said notes that:

> What Lawrence presents to the reader is an unmediated expert power – the power to be, for a brief time, the Orient. All the events putatively ascribed to the historical Arab Revolt are reduced finally to Lawrence's experiences on its behalf (243).

Lawrence not only becomes an Arab; in his own mind he becomes Arabia, and the political traumas of the region symbolize his sense of personal failure.

By creating this psychologically complex counter-narrative to the original heroic adventure story, Lawrence opened the door for countless

2 Lawrence's account of the Deraa incident is contentious and has interpreted both as a masochistic fantasy (Dawson 199) and a politically expedient fiction (Barr 195-200).

biographers to debate his legacy. John Mackenzie has suggested that he is the most profiled Briton of the twentieth century (150). In 1955 Richard Aldington exposed the inconsistencies in Lawrence's previous biographies by branding him a "congenital liar" and promised to "erase [him] from the pages of history" ("Lying Attributed" 13). As British imperial power diminished, so did the reputations of its imperial heroes; but T. E. Lawrence remained a source of unending fascination, and far from being erased from history, the myths that grew around him have endured.

Screening the Myth

Over the years, various attempts were made to bring Lawrence to the screen. Lawrence apparently had his own ideas about how such a film might be made. According to his brother:

> T. E. [Lawrence] thought Disney could do it justice – you know, cartoon trains dynamited into kaleidoscopic patterns in the air […] [He] thought his role in the Arab Revolt could best be understood through humor ("Brother Rejects," 7).

The first productions to be planned were based in Britain. A 1935 adaptation ("Revolt in the Desert") produced by Alexander Korda was prepared but abandoned because the British governor of Palestine refused to permit large assemblies of Arabs on location in Jerusalem. A second attempt in 1937 was halted after objections from the Turkish Republic, with whom Britain hoped to form an alliance in the looming war, and in 1955 a Rank project was abandoned due to unrest in Iraq (Brownlow 406).

By the time producer Sam Spiegel and director David Lean began to adapt Lawrence's life to the screen in 1959, they were faced with a large and contradictory body of material and a legend with an unstable meaning. The scale and complexity of the project was acknowledged when Spiegel purchased the film rights for no fewer than seven different biographies of Lawrence. By effectively taking possession of Lawrence's story, Spiegel also closed down any possible rival productions. The final piece in the jigsaw was added when Lawrence's brother agreed to sell the film rights for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* after approving a draft screenplay by the American

screenwriter Michael Wilson (Brownlow 409). According to Wilson's copious notes, the key theme in the film was to be Lawrence's desire for transformation:

> A man attempts to shed one identity (English) and to assume another (Arab). He cannot achieve the latter goal; neither can he turn back his previous identity and earlier values. In trying to serve two masters, Lawrence betrayed them both.

Wilson positioned this duality at the root of Lawrence's professional failure and mental disintegration. In his version of the script, Sherif Ali warns Lawrence: "It is said among my people that a man who serves two masters will lose his soul." After his experience at Deraa, Lawrence asks, "Why did I break? Because I'm afraid. You were right: a man who serves two masters has two faces. A man who serves two causes betrays them both" (Wilson, "Third Draft.") In this way, Wilson attempted to explain Lawrence's motives in fairly conventional psychological terms. His script demystified the man behind the myth and depicted him as a relatively traditional action-orientated hero. "Our picture should unveil a mystery," he noted, "a slow revelation of the man behind the myth – a probe, a gradual exposure of the failure that lay at the core of a triumph" (Wilson, "Elements and Facets.")

Wilson left the project after completing his third draft of the screenplay in December 1960.[3] According to Lean, in a letter to Spiegel written shortly after Wilson's departure, the major problem arose from the screenwriter's conception of Lawrence:

> The basic flaw is that in the present conception there is no margin for kickback off the main character. He just keeps on doing things and the audience watches and draws their own conclusions (Lean 1961).

Spiegel hired the British dramatist Robert Bolt as a replacement. Under new authorship, the screenplay took off in another direction. The opening

3 Wilson was a member of the Hollywood 'blacklist' of suspected Communists. Refusing to publicly renounce his alleged Communist affiliations, he was denied proper credit for his work until 1995, despite being largely responsible for creating the narrative shape of the film. See Brownlow 474-76; Turner 206-213.

scene now took place after Lawrence's funeral in St Paul's Cathedral. Jackson Bentley, an American journalist who reports Lawrence's story and obviously stands in for Lowell Thomas, is interviewed by a reporter as he leaves. "He was a poet, a scholar and a mighty warrior," Bentley tells him. Once out of earshot, he adds, "he was also the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey." Rather than making a specific reinterpretation of the Lawrence myths, as Wilson had attempted, the finished film contrasts these responses to his character, depicting him as a great hero but also questioning his heroism. As Dawson has suggested, *Lawrence of Arabia* incorporates both Thomas's adventure story and Lawrence's own psychological account into the same narrative frame, establishing a creative tension between these two trajectories (227).

This structural tension is created by dividing the narrative into two distinct sections, separated by the intermission. The first half depicts Lawrence's rise to heroic status as he is given a commission in Arabia and organizes the Arab Revolt. The second begins at the peak of Lawrence's soldiering career, as he throws the Ottoman army into disarray by leading a small Arab army in a series of guerrilla attacks. His success generates hubris which leads to psychological demise, personal failure and disillusionment. To a certain degree, Part One reflects Lowell Thomas's imperial adventure story, while Part Two resonates with Lawrence's own introspective lament on the nature of his legend. This thematic division is also registered in the film's visual style: in the first half, the desert landscape is represented through extensive sequences of panoramic, almost travelogue-like photography; after the intermission, the camera moves in closer to the action, the image darkens and enclosed spaces supplant the expanses of the desert.

Significantly, the first character to appear in the second section of the film is the journalist Jackson Bentley (Arthur Kennedy). Bentley tells Prince Feisal (Alec Guinness) that he is "looking for a hero" who will "show war in its more adventurous aspect" for an American audience. "You look for a figure who will draw your country towards war," Feisal surmises, adding, "Lawrence is your man." In the sequence that follows, Bentley is shown gleefully photographing Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) as he and his Bedouin army spectacularly derail an Ottoman train, the shutter on his camera operating in unison with the gunfire of the soldiers. The enemy defeated, Bentley asks Lawrence to pose for a picture. Lawrence agrees,

rubbing his hands in anticipation. As the Bedouins chant his name and wave their plunder at him, he climbs on to the train and parades before them, twirling his robes in the breeze for the camera. Delighted with the shot, Bentley exclaims, "Yes sir, that's my baby." By depicting Lawrence's collusion with a cynical American journalist, the film rehearses the Lowell Thomas-constructed Lawrence myth, while at the same time subverting it. Blood can be seen on Lawrence's hand as he speaks to Bentley, a grim and unsubtle portent of the carnage which is to follow. As he mounts the train, Lawrence's body is first shown as a shadow cast on the sand, one of several doubling motifs in the film that reinforces the divided nature of his character.

Lawrence of Arabia's two-part structure also serves to chart the psychological development of its hero and in particular his belief in his own exceptionality. As Lawrence is given his commission, he tells the bureaucrat Dryden (Claude Rains) that he thinks it will be "fun." "Only two kinds of creatures get fun out of the desert," Dryden replies, "Bedouins and gods, and you are neither." In fact, Lawrence seems determined that the desert will make him into both. As he is guided towards Prince Feisal's camp, Lawrence resolves to adopt the behavior of his Arab guide, drinking water only when he does and declaring that he is "different" from other Englishmen. Throughout the film, Lawrence's desire to become like an Arab is expressed through this capacity to endure physical discomfort, to impose an absolute will over his body. This theme of voluntary physical endurance is introduced at the beginning of Lawrence's story as he shows off his ability to hold a match until it burns to the end. "The trick is not minding that it hurts," he declares. Repeating the act in a later scene, a close-up of Lawrence's fingers is replaced by a long-shot of the sun over the desert, linking physical pain with desert survival.

Lawrence's second step towards shedding his English identity occurs when he turns back from his arduous trek across the Nefud desert to rescue a fallen rider. In what is effectively a reward for his endurance and humanity, Lawrence is given the iconic white Bedouin robes to replace his ill-fitting soldier's uniform. His transformation continues after a second feat of endurance, this time crossing the Sinai desert to reach British headquarters in Cairo. As he enters the officer's mess with his young Bedouin servant, Lawrence is initially mistaken for an Arab and referred to as Mustafa. He is soon recognized, but the British officers nevertheless

demand that the "wog" leave the building. Instead, Lawrence announces that "our side, the wogs" have seized Aqaba, repudiating the term and identifying himself as an Arab. In a later scene at the mess, Lawrence is swamped by admirers in a scene that recalls his earlier adulation by the Arabs. Physical endurance leads to transformation which is rewarded in turn by acceptance and praise. However, Lawrence's investment in Arab identity comes to an end in Deraa. Defying the advice of others, Lawrence enters the garrisoned town without a guard, convinced that he can pass as an Arab. Captured by the Ottoman military, he is tortured in a scene which either stands in for or precedes the rape sequence described in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. His final and most successful attempt to acquire a foreign identity ends violently. The second part of the film thus inverts the original trajectory: Lawrence is punished rather than rewarded.

Lawrence's adoption of Arab dress and customs was always a part of his myth. Indeed, it had been the crucial element in Michael Wilson's earlier drafts. His transformation into a god, on the other hand, seems to have been Bolt's invention. Lawrence's defiant belief in his ability to cross the Nefud desert is initially denounced by Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) as "a blasphemous conceit" and an affront to what has been destined or "written." However, his subsequent success leads Ali to pronounce that "truly for some men, nothing is written unless they write it." Ali is similarly skeptical when Lawrence makes plans to cross the Sinai desert. "Why not?" he tells Auda in a later scene, "Moses did." In part two, Lawrence is initially shaken when an Ottoman soldier shoots and misses him at close range. Apparently convinced of his invulnerability, he stands motionless, shocked and then serene as the soldier fires his remaining ammunition in his direction. "They can only kill me with a golden bullet," he later declares. Once again, this hubris leads to his undoing; as he enters the town, Lawrence self-consciously walks on water – a shallow puddle in fact – seeking "some way to announce myself." The torture that follows finally destroys him, supplanting his belief in his godlike invulnerability with a previously unseen sense of mortality. Shortly before Deraa, Lawrence angrily asks Ali: "Do you think I'm just anyone?" After he has recovered from the abuse, he tells Ali: "I've come to the end of myself," later adding, "Any man is what I am." As he reaches the limit of his capacity for endurance, so Lawrence's belief in his exceptionality is crushed.

Lawrence of Arabia makes the connection between the collapse of Lawrence's will for endurance and the emergence of his sadism by telescoping the passage of time between Deraa and the massacre at Tafas. In a scene that proved upsetting to Lawrence's surviving friends and relatives, he is shown to order the attack on the retreating Ottoman soldiers, crying "no prisoners" and shooting wildly as though finally venting his madness.[4] In contrast to the bloodless raid on Aqaba in part one, Tafas is depicted as a bloodbath, an atrocity in which Lawrence was not only complicit but for which he was arguably responsible. When the fighting ceases, Lawrence is shown looking in horror at his own reflection in his bloodied knife, a visual rhyme with a scene in part one when he receives his white robes and uses the same knife to admire himself and adjust his headdress. This additional doubling motif maintains the film's trajectory by depicting narcissism supplanted by self-disgust. The knife and doubling imagery are reinforced at the very end of the film when Feisal describes Lawrence as "a sword with two edges." It is also at Tafas that the cynicism and dishonesty of the myth-making media is most fully exposed. Discovering a bloodied and distressed Lawrence in the aftermath of the attack, a shocked Bentley declares: "here, let me take your rotten, bloody picture. For the rotten, bloody newspapers." In a later sequence, Bentley's image appears on the front page of an American newspaper. Taken entirely out of its context by the Western media, Lawrence's glazed expression operates not as evidence for the horror of the massacre but for his supposedly triumphant entry into Damascus.

The Lawrence of *Lawrence of Arabia* thus emerges as a fascinating but flawed figure, particularly when compared to the early versions of the Lawrence myth. The wide, open spaces of the Arab desert allow Lawrence to act out what he believes to be his destiny, but whereas his actions were depicted by Lowell Thomas as morally unambiguous, Lean's film adopts an alternative perspective. As the film's massacre at Tafas makes clear, violence is not redemptive for Lawrence, or even a means to establish order; it is merely destructive. While Jeffrey Richards has suggested that "the principal justification" for the British Empire was "the superiority of the British character" (31), I would suggest that *Lawrence of Arabia* subverts this representation, as well as defying the conventions of the bio-pic by consistently withholding the information necessary to "explain" its subject. At the time of its release, Spiegel insisted that this reading was intended

4 For the response of T. E. Lawrence's brother, see "Brother Rejects," 7.

by the filmmakers: "we have not tried to resolve the enigma of Lawrence but to perpetuate the legend, and to show why it continues to haunt us after all these years" (5). The film's original poster reinforces this preferred characterization. Depicting Lawrence's face heavily in shadow, it seems the very opposite of the unveiling Wilson had in mind. The critical reception of the film reinforced this interpretation. According to *Time*, *Lawrence of Arabia* withheld

> an answer to the fundamental enigma of Lawrence, a clue to the essential nature of the beast, a glimpse of the secret spring that made him tick [...] People who knew Lawrence did not catch it. Lawrence himself did not seem to know what it was. Perhaps it did not exist ("The Spirit.")

In their adaptation of the Lawrence myth, the filmmakers elected to obfuscate rather than clarify Lawrence's motives.

Political Dimensions

The principal creative personnel working on *Lawrence of Arabia* appear to have adopted differing stances to Britain's imperial past. Robert Bolt professed to long-held anti-imperialist views, insisting that he had been "bought up to disapprove of figures like T. E. Lawrence as being the colorful ornaments and stalking horses of imperialism" ("Clues" 16). He was also a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and had been imprisoned after joining a protest rally while under contract to write the film (Turner 191-98). David Lean, on the other hand, professed a rather more old-fashioned attitude towards the British Empire. In a letter written to Michael Wilson while scouting locations in Jordan, he claimed that

> The truth is that I think I still carry the "Boy's Own Paper" with me. It's a monthly magazine, long dead, which I used to devour in my youth, full of stories of Africa, India, China. No doubt a cliché-ridden lot of nonsense, but it had magic and the magic of distant places has clung on to me (Lean to Wilson).

The film's political position was further confused by the involvement of Sam Spiegel, a Zionist who had once worked in a Jewish kibbutz in Palestine and whose mother later moved to Israel. While shooting in Jordan, he maintained residence on his yacht in order to avoid sleeping on Jordanian soil (Fraser-Cavassoni 250). Although his precise attitudes to colonial nationalism are hard to determine, it seems unlikely that Spiegel would have wished to produce a film which endorsed the nationalism of Arab states at a time when so many had hostile relations with Israel.

Anti-colonial and anti-war sentiments are certainly in evidence in *Lawrence of Arabia*. One of the key motifs in the film is the circulation of Lawrence's pistol. It first appears when Lawrence makes a present of it to his Bedouin guide as he is led into the desert. However, when Ali approaches them at the well the guide draws it and Ali shoots him. Ali takes the pistol from the dead guide, but gives it back to Lawrence before the raid on Aqaba so he can execute the murderer Gasim (I. S. Johar) and settle the blood-feud. Shaken by the experience, Lawrence throws the gun into the sand, only to see dozens of Arabs scramble to pick it up. He is unable to stop the chain of events he has inadvertently set in motion. As Steven Caton observes, violence is thus shown to circulate "from the hand of the colonizer" (189). However, these critical sentiments exist alongside a disdain for the Arab people and colonial nationalism in general. The scenes towards the end of the film when Lawrence and the Arabs attempt to establish an Arabian government in Damascus are particularly revealing. Pursuing the British army into the city, they take control of its infrastructure and form the Arab National Council in the existing town hall. Their meeting is chaotic; members walk across the tables to insult each other and petty tribal disputes forestall debate. Lawrence calls order by banging his pistol on the table, but on this occasion it is beyond him to organize and lead the Arabs. Meanwhile, General Allenby (Jack Hawkins) orders British troops, including medical staff, to remain in quarters, ignoring the growing humanitarian disaster at the hospitals. As the power generators burn and Ottoman soldiers perish in the unstaffed military hospital, the Arabs begin to abandon Damascus. Lawrence remains in the town hall, abandoned by the Arabs but apparently still hoping to maintain control over the city on their behalf. In these scenes, the Arabs are depicted as childish, backward and inherently divided. Unable to govern themselves, they drift back into the desert whence they came. In order to assume command, the British military simply wait for the Arab leaders to lose interest.

This depiction of the Arab National Council suggests that, despite Lawrence's heroic efforts in their name, the Arabs were incapable and undeserving of self-government. The implications of these scenes in 1962 (as former colonial states all over the world became independent and began to form sovereign governments) are striking and resonate with patrician anxieties about how well former colonial nations would react to independence. In a later scene the film's repudiation of colonial nationalism goes even further. Ali (who according to Robert Bolt "has to represent emergent Arab nationalism" ("Apologia" 35)), pulls a knife on Auda (Anthony Quinn), with whom he has argued through the film. He quickly thinks better of it, but as he leaves Auda exclaims, "being an Arab will be thornier than you think, Harith!" With this, Ali disappears into darkness and is never seen again; as Caton notes, "factionalism is the last word" (193). At a time when pan-Arab nationalism exerted a strong political influence in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, this denigration of Arab unity seems to carry overt political connotations. *Lawrence of Arabia* was subsequently banned in Jordan – ironically the nation where a large proportion of the film was photographed – on the grounds that it was "anti-Arab" ("Jordan Bans" 6).[5] Strong criticisms were also voiced in Egypt, where it was noted that the film had been made under "Zionist" influence ("Egyptian Critics" 16). Perhaps surprisingly, *Lawrence of Arabia* makes no direct references to Judaism or Zionism. Nevertheless, the broader historical implications of the film's subject matter were apparent to some American critics. The reviewer of the New York magazine *Cue* noted that the Arab Revolt "led […] indirectly, to the establishment of the State of Israel" ("Lawrence of Arabia.") When the film went on general release in America, Columbia offered to send exhibitors "reprints from various Jewish publications on Lawrence of Arabia and his role 'in furthering the cause of Jewish people'" (*Lawrence of Arabia* Pressbook).

In place of the failed Arab government, Feisal negotiates with Allenby to administer the city with British technical assistance, a relationship encapsulated by Dryden's submission to "a British waterworks with an Arab flag on it." Allenby describes Arab power in Damascus as "illusory" under such an arrangement, but Feisal adds that "illusions can be powerful." It is a compromise for the British, but they have nevertheless imposed a form of control over the new government. Again the Cold War context seems

5 The film was also banned initially in the Turkish Republic. See Raw 252-261.

crucial: this mode of informal influence is very close to the type desired by Western powers in the postcolonial world. Like other depictions of the British Empire from the 1960s, *Lawrence of Arabia* is critical of the mendacity of the British politicians involved in the maintenance of empire yet fails to endorse local government as an alternative. Imperialism is recognized as corrupt, especially in the second part of the film, but nationalist self-government is shown to be no better. Some contemporary reviews reflected this reading. In Britain the *New Statesman* described the depiction of the Arab National Council as "slanted" (Coleman). Conversely, *Scene*, another British publication, regarded *Lawrence of Arabia's* depiction of Arabs as inappropriately positive: "the situation in the Middle East has changed a great deal since then and today, whether by accident or design, this film must certainly be received with raptures in Radio Cairo circles (Wheeler 32).[6] Neatly embodying *Lawrence of Arabia*'s ambivalence, the *Hollywood Reporter* judged the Arab characters to be "in their primitive, savage way, a noble people" (Powers).

The film's ambivalence towards imperialism and colonial nationalism is no better embodied than by Lawrence himself. Neither colonial nationalist nor European imperialist, Lawrence mediated between these two positions, initially with great success. However, Lawrence's involvement with the British military ultimately compromises his involvement with the Arabs. Learning of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (which covertly arranged for Ottoman territory in Arabia to be divided between Britain and France (Barr 46)), Allenby admonishes Lawrence: "You may not have known, but you certainly had suspicions. If we've told lies, you've told half-lies." Lawrence proceeds in his mission to capture Damascus for the Arabs, but in his failure he plays into the hands of the British. Outflanked by the machinations of British politicians, and presumably by Prince Feisal too, Lawrence is ultimately defeated. As he becomes aware of the extent to which he has been manipulated, Lawrence is also let off the hook for his involvement in the British and French colonization of Arabia. The historical Lawrence was a far more enthusiastic agent of British imperialism, but the film lets us believe that he was a romantic adventurer whose ideals were betrayed by scheming bureaucrats, a characterization that ultimately redeems him. Despite his sense of destiny, he was never in control, and thus not truly to blame. As he is driven out of the desert, mute and rendered indistinct by

6 Radio Cairo was the broadcasting service operated by the United Arab Republic.

the dirty windscreen, his driver (Peter Dukelow) cheerfully remarks, "well sir, going home." To the disillusioned, burned out Lawrence, going home is a form of defeat. As Wendy Webster suggests, it signifies the loss of the "expansive homosocial world of manly adventure" in which he has become a hero (215). As a motorcycle overtakes the car we recall Lawrence's fatal crash in the film's opening scene; going home, in a sense, is the beginning of his death. The film closes on an elegiac note as Lawrence mourns his loss; it is a nostalgic mode that might also mark the transition into a post-imperial age in the Britain of the present. It is possible to speculate that the "home" Lawrence seems to find so insignificant is the post-imperial Britain of 1962.

In an American context, however, the film might be read differently. I would suggest that *Lawrence of Arabia* resonated with anxieties about America's new role on the world stage. As in Britain, most reviewers were uncertain of its political significance and focused instead on the film's vast spectacle and the ambiguity of its hero. But there were others who begged to differ: according to the *Newsweek* critic, Lawrence was "a bridge between the truly medieval society of the Arab sheikdoms and contemporary civilization" ("All-Star"), while *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that Lawrence's influence was "still apparent in the emergence of Arab nationalism" (Powers). Richard L. Coe of the *Washington Post* identified the parallel in more partisan terms, claiming that "the United Arab Republic and Saudi Arabia represent […] tribes still struggling, 45 years after Lawrence's adventure with futility" (B18). For a few reviewers, the film also reflected the awkward effects of Third World nationalism closer to home. According to Coe, the nationalist ideology which Lawrence attempted to bring to the Arabs was "the same enigma […] which carries forth the dream of [Simon] Bolivar into today's Latin American nightmares (B18). In this analysis Lawrence is identified with anti-American ideology and activism. To underline the film's political elusiveness, Powers was keen to identify Lawrence with America itself:

> What Lawrence did is roughly comparable to a situation that might arise if the U.S. State Department were to send an obscure second lieutenant into Castro's Cuba to come back in a few weeks with an intelligence report on anti-Castro elements, only to have the second

> lieutenant raise a revolt, appoint himself field marshal-saint [and] capture Havana (Powers, "Lawrence").

The perceived connection between *Lawrence of Arabia* and American foreign policy strengthened over time; by 1989, when the film was re-released, the *Village Voice* described it as a "postcolonial spectacle" with "more than a hint of delirious New Frontiermanship in its representation of a handsome, quixotic molder of Third World aspiration" (Hoberman 59). Identifying the film as a portent of American foreign policy to come, *Time* noted that "in the picture's political wrangling and massacre scenes, we see hints of American history in the late '60s and American movies today: a preview of Viet Nam and a prequel to *Platoon*" (Corliss). As America engaged with Asian and Latin American nationalism, *Lawrence of Arabia*'s depiction of Britain's response to Third World self-determination evidently struck a chord, even though its significance remained open to conflicting interpretations. In contrast to so many earlier Hollywood imperial films, the world of *Lawrence of Arabia* is not an exotic playground where a Westerner needed only his sense of adventure to come out on top. As Lawrence's sense of exceptionalism crumbles, the film suggests that the business of imposing influence over foreign populations is beset by practical and moral difficulties.

The 'Lawrence of Arabia' myth was developed in Britain and America as a means to invigorate public interest for the Great War, but as time passed and western interests in the Middle East increased, T. E. Lawrence came to be much more closely associated with British imperialism. By the time filming began in 1960, the British Empire would have been unrecognizable to Lawrence had he been alive. The passage of time also served to complicate the public image of Lawrence himself: initially cast as a youthful and dashing, if eccentric, hero, subsequent revisions and reinterpretations of the myth highlighted his dysfunctional personality and the ambivalence of his motives in Arabia. As a result, *Lawrence of Arabia* portrayed a historical figure whose character and motives challenged the Lowell Thomas-constructed myth, set against a contemporary backdrop where the meaning of imperialism in Britain and America was rapidly shifting. Responding to these complexities, the filmmakers chose to emphasize Lawrence's ambiguity as both a hero and a failure, an agent of the British Empire but an advocate of Arab nationalism.

With similar ambivalence, the film criticized British imperial activities while also depicting colonial nationalism as a doomed enterprise. As a result of these complexities, *Lawrence of Arabia* seems to have been interpreted quite differently in Britain and America. In the former, it appeared as a nostalgic lament for a passing age of well-intentioned imperialism, while in the latter it resonated with anxieties about the nation's increasing involvement in the post-colonial Third World. Older Hollywood films evoked parallels between the British Empire and American internationalism, but in Lawrence of Arabia the analogy is much less flattering to America's sense of exceptionalism and its expansionist ambitions.

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