

# FREEDOM REVIEW

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## Making and Unmaking U.S. Mideast Policy

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I first met Howard Teicher on about page 225 of his memoir, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm*. That was in April 1983, when I was working in the State Department and a mutual friend brought us together for lunch, expecting that we'd have a lot in common. Teicher dazzled me at that lunch. Only twenty-eight years old, he was already on the staff of the National Security Council. His career had begun as an unpaid intern just six years earlier, in 1977, and his first government paycheck (as a part-time clerk-typist!) followed soon after. By 1981 he was already an assistant to the counselor of the State Department—precisely the position I held at the time of our meeting. And a year

**TWIN PILLARS TO  
DESERT STORM:  
AMERICA'S FLAWED VISION  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM  
NIXON TO BUSH**  
*by Howard Teicher and  
Gayle Radley Teicher.*  
*William Morrow, New York, 1993.*  
*418 pp. \$23.00.*

later he was working in the White House. You needn't be expert in Washington ways to appreciate this meteoric ascent from nowhere.

But it wasn't so much Teicher's ascent that impressed me as it was his

phenomenal grasp of the political process. A single lunch together made me realize I was in the presence of a master of the bureaucratic craft, an impression confirmed in subsequent years. Teicher had a clear sense of political goals. He had energy. He knew people. Most important of all, he came up with practical plans and initiatives.

Here's one example—Teicher's guideline for American policy vis-à-vis the Arabs and Israel: he promotes a parallel approach that is "as tough or as forthcoming with the Arab world as we chose to be with Israel." A virtuous circle would follow, he shows: "While this approach could be counted upon in the short term to provoke the Arabs, it

would increase U.S. influence within Israel. If that influence led ultimately to Israeli concessions, Arab confidence in the United States would grow, thereby eventually increasing our influence in the Arab world as well." This makes good sense.

### Teicher's effect

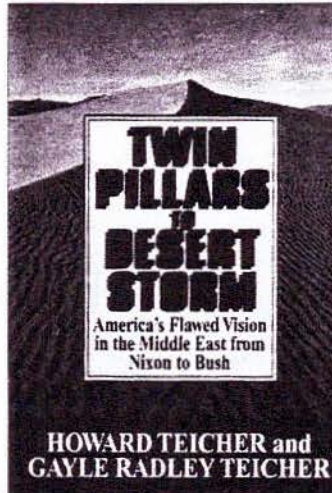
Knowing Teicher, I read his awkward but informative autobiography differently from the way a stranger might. First, I believed his claims to having affected the course of American foreign policy during his decade in government. For example, he tells how, when still an entry-level employee in the Department of Defense, he brazenly walked uninvited into a meeting headed by the American and Israeli secretaries of defense; more surprising yet, by virtue of being present, he got himself assigned to write an options paper to increase U.S. military aid to Israel from \$2.5 billion a year to \$4 billion. If you don't know him, you might not believe the story, but if you do, you will.

Second, I read *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm* wondering how this political impresario could have gotten so badly ensnared in the Iran/contras affair that he found himself in February 1987 with only four hours' notice to clear out his desk and turn in his White House pass. It turns out that Teicher's problem centered on a single secret telephone conversation he held in March 1984 on direct orders from his superior. He called David Kimche of the Israeli Foreign Ministry to inquire about the possibility of Israel's providing millions of dollars in cash to assist the Nicaraguan contras. When Kimche turned him down, the matter apparently ended. But two-and-a-half-years later, when the Iran/contras story broke, this early conversation came back to haunt Teicher in two ways: legally, it made him a suspect in the criminal inquiry into the diversion of funds from the Iranians to the contras; in the press, it made him plausibly the "mastermind" of the whole escapade.

In other words, Iran/contras was so big and so unexpected, even a champion swimmer found himself unable to keep from drowning. Not surprisingly, Teicher left government service in 1987 and

went to work in something entirely different—computer software.

As is so often the case with government memoirs, the personal dimension in *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm* is of greater and more lasting value than the book's argument. The latter can be summed up in a single sentence: "Operation Desert Storm was the inevitable



result of America's flawed vision in the Middle East." To back this up, Teicher provides evidence how, from the late 1970s on, he warned against cozying up to Iraq. Fair enough, but this overly simplifies a complex story.

### New information

The abundant new information *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm* offers makes the book important. For example, Teicher tells of reports reaching Washington in February 1979 of a South Yemeni invasion into North Yemen, prompting the U.S. government to respond by sending M-60 tanks, M-113 armored personnel carriers, and F-5 fighter aircraft. A month later, it turned out, North Yemen's government had conjured this story of a South Yemen invasion out of thin air; in fact, North Yemen had been the aggressor.

Also noteworthy: Yitzhak Shamir informed Washington in March 1984 that his government had recently decided Iran posed a graver threat than Iraq; as a gesture to Baghdad, he proposed that Iraqi oil flow through an old, unused pipeline to the Mediterranean, crossing through Israeli-held territory. American diplomats duly conveyed this offer to Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz. Aziz's response? He "turned pale, looked

up at the ceiling, shook his head" and refused even to accept the message because if he did, Saddam Hussein would execute him "on the spot."

Drawing on inside information, Teicher makes a strong case against Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who comes off as arrogant, wrong-headed, and inconsistent. Teicher gives new teeth to the old saw to the effect that Weinberger "never saw a weapons system he didn't want to buy, but he never saw a situation in which he was prepared to use force." It appears that Weinberger, "on his own initiative ordered the [U.S.] Marines to depart Beirut and return to their ships on September 10[1982]" a precipitous departure which led directly to the Sabra and Shatila massacre days later, as well as the bombing of the Marine barracks a year later, killing 281 soldiers. Almost as appalling was Weinberger's response to the September 1984 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, when he argued against retaliation against Syria or Iran or installations in Lebanon on the grounds that "We don't have evidence." Despite these repeated mistakes, Weinberger insisted he understood the Middle East better than anyone else in Washington.

The government memoir is a difficult genre, and Teicher doesn't quite master it. He provides too much potted history for his main readership, the specialists who will comb his text for new information; but he provides too little narrative for the novice. Like most government analysts, he writes easily about policy options; but talking about himself brings on a stilted style which makes him sound egotistical when he's only recounting his experiences.

In the final analysis, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm* is less about "America's flawed vision in the Middle East" than it is a testimonial to the human costs associated with criminalizing policy differences such as occurred during the Iran/contras affair. Teicher, an immensely capable man with a potentially limitless career ahead in government, was driven out along with others. He writes with bitterness, and it's no wonder, for he has much to be bitter about. FR

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