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William E. Odom. “The Cold War Origins of the U.S. Central Command,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:2: 52-82 (Spring 2006). doi: 10.1162/jcws.2006.8.2.52, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.2.52>.

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Published by H-Diplo on 6 June 2007

Much credit has been given to the Reagan administration for its defense build-up, actions in the Middle East, and especially the end of the Cold War. While the Reagan administration did indeed serve as a factor in ending the Cold War, a fair amount of credit also has to be given to President Carter and his policies, specifically human rights and his support of the development of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), as equally viable elements that contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union. William E. Odom, in “The Cold War Origins of the U.S. Central Command,” provides great insight into the importance and origins of CENTCOM between 1977 and 1981. Beyond his discussion of the organizational foundations and debates that established a military command designed to facilitate U.S. military operations in Southwest Asia and the Middle East, Odom provides significant evidence as to the Carter administration’s importance as a major factor in the success of Reagan’s “military build-up.”

Rather than providing a dry analysis of organizational history, Odom captures the tension and turmoil associated with the period 1977 to 1981 as President Carter and his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, moved to check the Soviet Union’s expansion in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. In addition to the traditional Cold War threat posed by the Soviet Union and its client states, Odom also observes that the Carter administration began to recognize the threat posed by transnational terrorist groups as a result of the Iranian Revolution. This issue, which has significant currency in 2007, links the importance of the Cold War to the current and on-going military operations in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Odom’s history of CENTCOM is based on the premise that without the foundation established by Brzezinski and Carter the United States may have had a much more difficult task in military deployments to the Middle East in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Backed by prodigious research, and drawing on an impressive array of sources, Odom skillfully captures the history of the development of CENTCOM. Infused within this dynamic process, which Brzezinski and the National Security Council’s Special Coordination Committee (SCC) guided during meetings on “Persian Gulf Security,” is an interaction of larger variables that influenced the strategic environment of the era. Against a backdrop of post-Vietnam recovery, arms control negotiations, the Soviet Union expansion into the Middle East, and the Iranian revolution, Odom captures the palpable changes in the world in the four years of Carter’s tenure as president.

In contrast to the traditional interpretation of Carter as being soft on defense and disinterested in foreign policy, Odom offers a much more vigilant image of Carter and his interests in military

and foreign policy issues. In addition to this strong portrayal of Carter, Odom also highlights the great talents and insights of Brzezinski as a critical element in the formulation of a new direction in national security policy that focused on the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

In addition to Odom's positive assessment of the on-going policy augmentations being considered by Carter and Brzezinski, he carefully explains that the "diplomatic mood of nearly all moderate Arab states" began to falter, which diminished their overt support of the United States (56). Although the administration recognized the importance of the region and the fact that something had to be done to correct this emerging issue, there was no consensus on the proper approach. The State Department, not wanting to alienate Arab nations, argued that a "more vigorous presence" would be "unwelcome and disruptive" (57). Conversely, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the National Security Council (NSC) went on the record as supporting an increased American presence in the Persian Gulf.

Odom discusses a rift within the administration as to the future course of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. The usefulness of this analysis is clarified by the strategic vision of the Department of Defense and the National Security Council as to the future importance of the Persian Gulf within the larger context of the Cold War and the regional issues pertinent to U.S. national security goals. On the other hand, the lack of strategic awareness and global vision offered by Cyrus Vance and the State Department supports the traditional historical interpretation that the Carter administration, or at least the Department of State, was not fully aware of the fundamental changes happening within the strategic security environment in the late 1970s. Odom's depiction of the position advanced by NSC and DoD shatters the old historiographic paradigm that the Carter administration lacked strategic vision.

Odom explains that the vision advanced by Brzezinski and his allies in DoD led Carter in August 1977 to order the Pentagon to create a rapid deployment force (RDF) for the Gulf region. However, budgetary issues and infighting between DoD and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) led to the withering of the President's order. Nevertheless, Odom presents an enlightening analysis of the importance and significance of the President's order in the context of the strategic value of the Persian Gulf and Middle East region for the United States. Essentially, he argues that Brzezinski envisioned a "major strategic reorientation" for the United States that centered upon new diplomatic and military initiatives in the region (61).

Beyond his analysis and discussion of the origins of CENTCOM during the Carter administration, Odom provides a solid discussion of the transfer of several of Carter's Persian Gulf and Middle East initiatives into the Reagan administration. Odom's overview of the origins of CENTCOM and its evolution into the 1980s is a significant piece of scholarship that merits serious attention by diplomatic, presidential, military, and Cold War historians. His analysis of Brzezinski and the NSC's vision to "reorient" the United States diplomatically and militarily in the Middle East offers insights into the historical legacy of the last decade of the Cold War and also provides links to the contemporary operational environment.

Sean N. Kalic earned a Ph.D. in History from Kansas State University and has advanced degrees in Strategic Studies and European History. He is a Cold War specialist who has focused his research on U.S. defense policy, the strategic nuclear balance, nuclear

strategy. In addition to studying the Cold War, Dr. Kalic has recently expanded his research into the history of terrorism as a national security threat. His endeavor into this new field has yielded *Combating a Modern Hydra: Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism* published by the Combat Studies Institute Press in the summer of 2005. In addition to this publication, Dr. Kalic is finishing a manuscript, which is under contract, on the development of U.S. space policy from 1946 to 1967. Currently, Dr. Kalic is an assistant professor of Military History in the Department of Military History at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge