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Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East (review)

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chairman of the Armed Services Committee to “Wait” was actually its antithesis, namely, “there’s no use in waiting.” And when Rusk’s October 23d comment about Soviet ships approaching the naval blockade turns out to be “that could well be the baby food ships” rather than “that could well be the biggest of the ships,” the Secretary’s composure and wry sense of humor are much better appreciated.

In fairness, other regional ways of speaking probably caused difficulties too, as illustrated by Robert Kennedy’s reference on October 23d to British Ambassador “David Ormsby-Gore,” originally heard and recorded as “General de Gaulle,” no small mistake indeed. There is also General Maxwell Taylor’s supposed self-description as a “pessimist” which has been revised to “I’m impressed with this.” Finally, if the curious reader compares JFK’s appraisal of Nikita Khrushchev’s motives for putting MRBMs/IRBMs into Cuba on page 267 of the “Concise Edition” and on page 438 of the 1997 edition, the historical benefits of new technology and superb editors are on display.

Combined with its many strengths, especially its greater reliability, this edition has two puzzling weaknesses. The first is that compelling criteria for the major omissions (and additions) are never made explicit, which means that serious students of the Missile Crisis must still consult those lengthy parts excised from the Harvard edition. The second shortcoming, closely related to the first, is that its numerous ellipses are never referenced to that earlier edition.

As a college freshman, this reviewer turned eighteen on Saturday, 27 October 1962, fully convinced then that he would not celebrate another birthday. A lifetime curiosity as to how he did makes this remarkable “hole in the wall” personally irresistible. The “Concise Edition” should be a must assignment for all upper-level courses on twentieth-century U.S. diplomatic and military history. And for anyone who prefers to be prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, and presiding judge at the same time. Take a look, and render your own verdict on JFK and his advisers.

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***Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East.***

By Michael B. Oren. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-19-515174-7. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xv, 446. \$30.00.

“We have screwed every Arab country” was the crass verdict of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Haim Bar-Lev, speaking to the cabinet a few days after the end of the Six Day War. But a reluctant screwing it was, according to Michael Oren, in his acclaimed history of the war. He efficiently summarizes political-military events leading up to the

1967 crisis and moves at a measured pace through the six days of combat, with judicious selections from participant interviews and memoirs, along with recently declassified documents. Military historians will find little about force structure, armaments, or the planning and preparation that made the IDF so formidable in 1967, and the author's maps are wholly inadequate. But the narrative is lively, breaking new ground on many points, and the incorporation of Arab sources and first-hand accounts gives it a balance that cannot be seriously challenged.

In forcing the crisis, Arab leaders displayed unwarranted confidence in their military power. Egypt in particular suffered from hubris; their dismal campaign in Yemen—characterized in equal parts by incompetence and brutality—should have alerted them to deep-seated problems, but these were ignored by the man Oren identifies as the architect of Egypt's disgraceful performance in the Six Day War—Field Marshal 'Amer, Nasser's longtime crony and a man with a truly staggering gulf between his ambition and his talents. Nasser himself, desperate to regain his preeminence within the Arab world, pushed the Israelis to the wall during the spring and summer of 1967 by closing the Straits of Tiran, forward-deploying Egyptian troops while expelling UN observers from the Sinai, and encouraging the Egyptian Air Force to overfly the Dimona nuclear reactor.

After painful and acrimonious debate Israel elected to seize the initiative, planning to fight a single-front ground war against Egypt on the heels of a brilliantly conceived and executed omnidirectional air campaign to neutralize all three principal Arab air forces. The IDF expected Jordan and Syria to be verbally bellicose while militarily restrained, but the willingness of both countries to bombard targets in Israel finally drove the cabinet—after success in the Sinai was assured—to expand the war. Oren painstakingly documents the reluctance with which Israeli political and military leaders authorized the IDF's bloody incursion into the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Jordan's self-defeating pugnacity was a late development, triggered by King Hussein's fear that remaining aloof from Nasser's confrontation with Israel would threaten his dynasty. In the case of Syria the hatred of Israel was reinforced, Oren notes, by irresponsible behavior on the part of the U.S.S.R., which had long been feeding Arab paranoia with false intelligence about an IDF buildup in northern Israel and alleged invasion plans. The Israelis tolerated Syria's cross-border shelling for a remarkably long time after the outbreak of the war, with the cabinet voting on June 8th (at Moshe Dayan's recommendation) not to attack the Golan Heights. Dayan reversed himself the next morning and—without consulting the Prime Minister—authorized an uphill frontal assault that succeeded in large part because the Syrian Army had prudently decided to withdraw most of its forward-deployed forces from the Heights.

One issue Oren lays decisively to rest (which has gone virtually unmentioned by most reviewers) is the attack on the USS *Liberty*. Military professionals with first-hand experience of the "fog of war" will find Israel's case for

mistaken identity persuasive. Sadly, we cannot expect it to persuade the powerful and persistent “Liberty Lobby” in the U.S., which brushes off every Israeli apology as readily as it embraces every conspiracy theory. Oren notes that after thirty-five years no plausible motive for such an attack has surfaced, and given the Israelis’ cautious and convoluted political-military decision making process (which he so ably documents), it is impossible to disagree with him.

Oren somewhat surprisingly lapses into ambiguity at the end of his narrative. He asserts that “Even from the perspective of thirty-five years, the answer to the question ‘Did six days of war truly change the Middle East?’ remains equivocal.” But the record of the past three decades suggests that in occupying Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem the Israelis made a decisive break with the past. They got into colonialism, and opened the door to a settlement movement that has frustrated every attempt to bring peace to the region. The key counterfactual is how the Palestinian community on the West Bank might have evolved had Jordan showed the modicum of restraint that would have stayed the Israelis’ hand in 1967. Given the opportunity, would Palestinians have resigned themselves to becoming citizens of Jordan instead of collectively endorsing “PLO, Inc.?” The answer is beyond the scope of Oren’s book, but he might have posed the question.

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***The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Israeli Attack on the U.S. Navy Spy Ship.***

By A. Jay Cristol. Washington: Brassey’s, 2002. ISBN 1-57488-414-X. Maps. Photographs. Illustrations. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xx, 294. \$27.50.

On 8 June 1967, during the Six Day War fought by Israel against Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, the Israeli Air Force and Navy attacked a U.S. signals intelligence ship, the USS *Liberty*, killing thirty-four Americans and injuring 171. The *Liberty* was in a declared war zone, fourteen miles off the Sinai, but whether Israel knew it was attacking an American ship or mistakenly believed it was an Egyptian vessel has become fodder for outlandish conspiracy theories and added to the polemics of the Arab-Israeli conflict. One need only conduct a search for the USS *Liberty* on the Internet to see the scope of the material. The author convincingly concludes that the attack on the *Liberty* was the result of many tragic mistakes and that Israel did not knowingly attack an American ship.

A. Jay Cristol is uniquely qualified as a former U.S. Navy aviator and lawyer, civil lawyer, and federal judge to examine the *Liberty* incident. He conducted over five hundred interviews for this book and is the only non-Israeli to interview the pilots who attacked the *Liberty*. His research is based on every available source, including many recently de-classified documents. His sources and research are carefully cited and are maintained by the