

# *Buraimi: A Study In Diplomacy by Default*

**BUSHROD HOWARD, JR.**

**L**AST SUMMER, on August 20, the United Nations Security Council debated for four hours the charge signed by eleven Arab nations that Britain had violated the U.N. Charter in helping the Sultan of Muscat put down a rebellion by the followers of the Imam of Oman. At the final vote, which rejected the complaint, the United States abstained, declaring that it did not have "sufficient" information to vote one way or the other. The record suggests, however, that the State Department had, if anything, too much information. What it had lacked all along was the will to make a stand.

A review of what led up to last summer's vest-pocket war in Oman suggests that the practice of diplomacy by default can be very costly to all concerned—in this case to the American oil companies, to the prestige of the United States government, and to British-American relations in the Middle East.

The fighting itself took place in a region of uncertain sovereignty and even more uncertain boundaries that has traditionally formed part of the chain of British Protected States along the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The nominal adversaries were the Sultan of Muscat and Oman, sovereign of the sparsely settled coast stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Aden Protectorate, and the rebellious Imam of Oman, a religious leader who is now claiming the mountain lands lying just inland from the coast. The British maintain that Oman comes under the suzerainty of Muscat, while the Arab League and Saudi Arabia have recently preferred to consider it an independent state. Ostensibly the fighting was the latest explosion of the long-standing boundary disputes between Saudi Arabia and the British-protected Persian Gulf states. More importantly, however, it was a struggle between American and British oil interests.

The concept of national boundaries is new to the Arabian Peninsula, whose empty sands and salt wastes have discouraged permanent occupation. But the unification of the peninsula under the late Ibn Saud in 1927, the discovery of oil in Bahrein in 1932, and the grant of the first American oil concession by Saudi Arabia in 1933 made the determination of boundaries a necessity. Accordingly, throughout the 1930's the Saudis and the British (acting on behalf of their Arab wards) made a determined if leisurely effort to negotiate the eastern boundaries of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states. These negotiations were not successful, but it was



thought that they had at least defined the area in dispute. This area was bounded on the south by the Ryan Line, which represented the maximum territory the British were then willing to concede to the Saudis. The northern boundary of the area, called the Fuad Line, represented the maximum territory then claimed by Saudi Arabia. All subsequent maps showed either one or both of

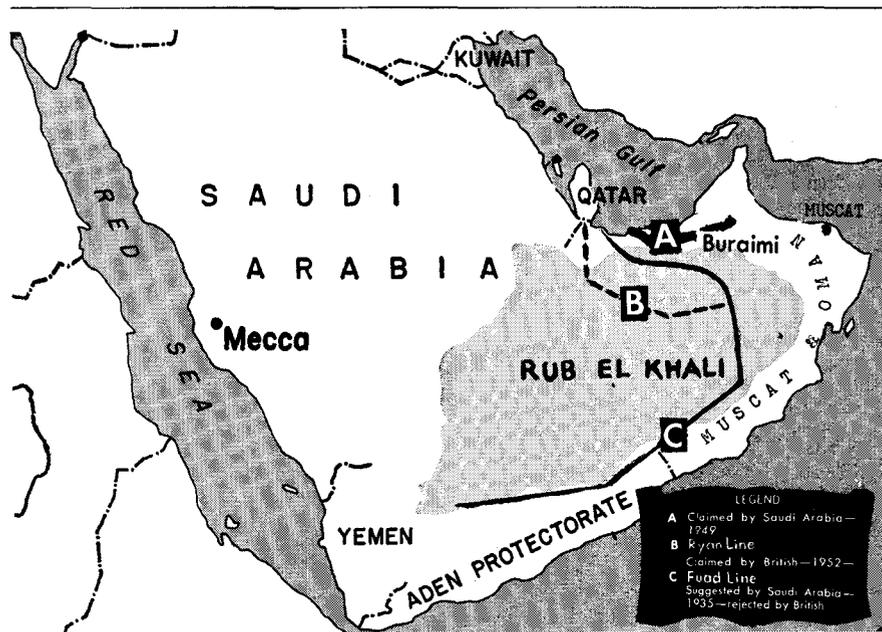
the lines, and Saudi schoolbooks, the California and Texas companies' concession map of 1939, and all Aramco maps as late as 1948 showed the Fuad Line alone as the Saudi boundary.

As sole concessionaire in Saudi Arabia, Aramco understandably took a lively interest in King Saud's efforts to extend his kingdom. By the same token, the Iraq Petroleum Company, which holds all the concession rights in the Persian Gulf states south of Bahrein, took an equally lively interest in blocking such efforts. Ownership of Aramco is wholly American, divided among Standard Oil of New Jersey, Standard of California, and the Texas Company (thirty per cent each), and Socony Mobil (ten per cent). I.P.C. is British-managed and -controlled but internationally owned—23.75 per cent each by British and French government companies, Royal Dutch Shell, and the American-owned Near East Development Corporation (a joint interest of Standard of New Jersey and Socony Mobil). The remaining five per cent is held by the trust of the late C. S. Gulbenkian.

## **Mr. Young Goes to Dhahran**

The first sign of trouble ahead came in 1948 when Aramco surrendered all its rights in the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia Neutral Zone at the head of the Persian Gulf in return for oil rights to all other offshore areas of Saudi Arabia. To determine the extent of Saudi offshore rights, Aramco retained Judge Manley Hudson of the Harvard Law School, who sent his assistant, Richard Young, to Saudi Arabia to undertake the task. When the Saudi government heard that Young was in Dhahran, it asked to be allowed to consult him. Aramco promptly agreed. In early 1949, Saudi Arabia issued a proclamation defining its territorial waters (a definition that the United States government protested was too sweeping) and asserting claims to the mineral rights in the adjacent high seas of the Persian Gulf.

Not satisfied with this, later in 1949 the Saudis made a claim to most of the land area between Qatar and Buraimi, which included a good chunk of the sheikdom of Abu Dhabi, another British Protected State, and two hundred miles of



coastline with some of the most highly promising offshore oil prospects in the area. When confronted with the fact that this claim included some ten thousand square miles beyond the Fuad Line, Saudi Arabia replied that the Fuad Line was not a "claim" but "a compromise" offer that had now lapsed. The total area now under dispute covered thirty thousand square miles of flat salt wasteland, uninhabited except for a few thousand tribesmen living in and around the Buraimi Oasis and the villages of the Liwa Oasis.

**S**UCH were the beginnings of the Buraimi dispute and the eventual fighting in Oman. British allegations that the dispute was fathered by Aramco to enlarge its concession area were indignantly denied. The record, however, would seem to suggest that the British were not far from right.

In the early part of 1950, while the British and Saudis were negotiating an agreement to suspend all oil activities in the newly expanded "disputed area," Aramco took over much of the preparation of the evidence and the legal arguments in support of the Saudi government's 1949 claims. Although Aramco officially claimed that the boundary dispute was not its concern, it again retained Richard Young to work on the legal aspects of the case. When he registered as an agent of the Saudi government on April 25, 1955, Mr. Young declared in his statement that

he was "retained by the Government of Saudi Arabia as counsel on its boundary arbitration by means of a verbal arrangement with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs on 21 January 1955." His statement further showed that from 1950 to 1954 he had made eight trips to Saudi Arabia, where he had given "legal advice from time to time to the government of Saudi Arabia, outside the U.S., by arrangement with Aramco."

Aramco also provided the Saudi government with the services of its Arab Research Division, headed by Dr. George Rentz, for the purpose of gathering (or in the British view manufacturing) evidence for the Saudi case. The major effort of Dr. Rentz and his fellow workers was to employ Arabs from the disputed area as "relators," who would relate for the record what they knew of the history and people of the area. The British alleged that this was a subterfuge by which Aramco was bribing the tribes. They further claimed that the "relators" were obliged to sign (by thumbprint) a Saudi tax receipt each time they received their pay. During the subsequent arbitration hearings in Geneva, Saudi Arabia did in fact produce a mass of tax receipts from these tribesmen as evidence that it exercised sovereignty in the disputed area.

#### A Definitive Work by Aramco

Truly massive evidence of Aramco's interest in the boundary dispute came to light in 1952 with the

publication in Cairo of a six-hundred-page book entitled *Oman and the Southern Shore of the Gulf* that was published in Arabic and English by the Arab Research Division of Aramco. The book is an ambitious study of the whole area from Qatar to the Indian Ocean. Its preface refers, significantly enough, to a study by Aramco completed in 1950 of "the Eastern reaches of al-Hasa Province," the very territory which Saudi Arabia had just claimed in 1949. The work also defines the Imamate of Oman as an independent state. British readers of this volume (which is now unobtainable) might well have concluded that Saudi Arabia (with the backing of Aramco) would in due course claim the entire area up to the Imamate of Oman, recognize Oman as an independent state, and so reduce the Sultanate of Muscat to a narrow coastal strip on the Gulf of Oman.

Aramco's purpose in publishing the volume is in any event somewhat cloudy. The preface states, "... while the information contained herein will be of value to those who are actively engaged in the endeavor to settle the boundary problems that now exist, it will also serve a wider purpose in providing those interested in Arabian affairs with an opportunity to become familiar with one of the least known corners of the Peninsula. . ." This passage hardly appears to qualify the volume as an innocuous work of disinterested scholarship.

#### Clash of Empires

By 1953, Saudi-British relations had taken a threatening turn for the worse. The boundary negotiations that had been in progress off and on since the Saudi claims of 1949 broke up in January, 1952. As a result, Saudi Arabia "occupied" the Buraimi Oasis villages in August, and the British replied by "blockading" Buraimi and resuming oil operations in the disputed area in November. At this point there was a clear need—and opportunity—for constructive mediation and, if necessary, intervention. Yet the State Department, which represented the only other power involved in the area, clung stubbornly to a position of strict neutralism.

Oddly enough, the only act of con-

structive mediation was provided in the latter part of 1953 by a vice-president of Aramco, who had for some time believed that an equitable and lasting solution was possible. He proposed that since Aramco already had more than sufficient oil and acreage in the Arabian Peninsula, the disputed area should be ceded entirely to the Saudis and that the Saudis in return should give exclusive oil rights in this area to the British. This would have satisfied the Saudis and at the same time given the British status in the area and freed them from the fear that American oil interests would continue to prod the Saudi government into further territorial claims.

**T**HIS PROPOSAL was discussed in London at a luncheon given by the Aramco vice-president and attended by an official of the British Foreign Office and a member of the U.S. embassy, as well as London representatives of both Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony Mobil. Although the Aramco man's suggestion was entirely unofficial (in fact, it was known that his views would probably be considered heretical by Aramco's board), the Foreign Office lost no time in acting on it. In late February of 1954, the British government delivered a note to the Saudis agreeing to arbitration by an international tribunal with certain conditions as to the area involved and interim police control of the region.

At the end of the note came this condition:

"C: All the above provided that the oil operations of the IPC and AIOC [Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which had the offshore concession in the sheikdom of Abu Dhabi] go on . . . It is recognized, of course, that the Arabian American Oil Company's concession would, as things stand, extend to cover any area which as a result of arbitration might pass to Saudi sovereignty. It is not desired to impair Aramco's concessionary rights. Nevertheless, if the Saudi government and Aramco were agreeable, the two British oil companies would in due course be interested in the negotiation of concessionary rights in any disputed area that might pass to Saudi sovereignty."

It is not hard to see the advantages the British foresaw in making this offer. If accepted, it would re-establish Saudi-British relations on a sound basis, which would do much to reconsolidate Britain's position on the Persian Gulf; it would eliminate the chief cause of British-American oil rivalry in the Arabian Peninsula and so represent a step toward achieving a common Anglo-American policy in the Middle East; and it would deprive anti-western nationalists of rich material for divisive propaganda. Best of all, perhaps, from the British viewpoint, it placed Aramco squarely behind the eight ball, for under the terms of the proposal the Saudi government could only stand to gain both additional territory and additional oil revenues. If the offer was rejected, Britain

Reactions to the British note were mixed. The State Department, from its position on the sidelines, hoped that a satisfactory settlement could be reached and instructed George Wadsworth, our ambassador in Jidda, to inform the Saudis that the U.S. government viewed the British note as "a step in the right direction." At first the Saudi government was inclined to accept the British proposal. It interpreted the note to mean that if, as Aramco claimed, the British were interested only in oil, this was a most favorable opportunity for a settlement, even without arbitration. Aramco's reaction, however, was one of violent and emotional opposition. When asked by the Saudi government if the company would surrender any rights it might obtain in the dis-



could make a strong case for its suspicion that Aramco was using Saudi territorial demands to expand its oil concessions.

puted area, if and when it should come under Saudi sovereignty, Aramco replied with a categorical "No." Aramco officials promptly

charged that "British injection of the oil issue is highly regrettable and discloses true British motives." To them, British motives were clear: "Their primary concern is an oil concession on Aramco concession territory."

When Aramco learned that both the Saudi government and the State Department looked on the British note with favor, it spared no effort to reverse the tide. Throughout March, 1954, scarcely a day passed without high Aramco officials calling on the State Department singly or in groups to register their protest. The pressure continued via letters, cables, and personal visits throughout April and May. The Aramco argument emphasized in particular that the company was being asked to give up "the assets of the corporation" to settle a political matter—this despite the fact that the assets in question lay far beyond the boundaries of its concession as stipulated in the original contract with Saudi Arabia and as shown as late as 1948 on its own maps. The Aramco argument also conveniently ignored the views put forth by one of its own vice-presidents, who seemed quite satisfied with the assets of the corporation as they stood.

**A**LTHOUGH these pressures did not persuade the State Department that the British proposal had in any way prejudiced Aramco's position, it would appear that they were effective in driving the State Department back to the position of safe neutrality from which it had begun to emerge. As late as the end of May, when Aramco was threatening to precipitate an incident by penetrating into that part of the disputed area where the British were in military control, the best the State Department could do was to urge the British to withdraw from the area and to complain to the Saudis of their habit of involving Aramco in political matters. On July 28, 1954, the British government, no longer willing to count on the State Department to hold to its original position and to encourage the Saudis to do likewise, agreed to arbitration of the dispute—this time, ominously enough, without any mention of the controlling Condition C. This could only mean that the British were go-

ing into the arbitration with the idea of buying time rather than with any hope of reaching a satisfactory solution.

### Gunboats in the Desert

From now on the moderates on the British side appeared to lose control. The sabotage of what after all was a most reasonable proposal seemed to convince the British that American oil interests were the real instigators and would be the beneficiaries of Saudi expansion. Accordingly, the British, who had no local troops in the area in early 1954, made a series of moves to strengthen their hand for what appeared to them to be the necessary policy of force. The Trucial Oman Scouts, British-officered and -financed, which had been disbanded in early 1954 as the result of a mutiny, were re-formed. To supplement this force, Sir Stephen Gibson, managing director of I.P.C., made an agreement with the Sultan



of Muscat to finance an army to assure the security of Oman. Since this region had never been under the sultan's full control, it was clear that this agreement, aimed at armed intervention in matters of sovereignty, was one that could hardly have been approved by a responsible private company without the backing of the British government. It was presumably for this

reason (and to keep the U.S. government in the dark) that the I.P.C. management did not—until several months later—inform its two American partners, Standard of New Jersey and Socony Mobil.

When these forces had been raised, equipped, and trained, Britain acted with alacrity. Under a barrage of accusations of Saudi bribery, the British arbitrator, Sir Reader Bullard, walked out in the middle of the arbitration hearings in Geneva. This was in September, 1955. In October the British occupied not only Buraimi but also the Imamate of Oman. Thanks to eighteen months' respite and oil-company funds, they were able to complete this operation without using any but the locally raised and British-officered troops.

Unfortunately, the easy success of this venture led the British to believe that the early-nineteenth-century methods which had served on the North-West Frontier in India were the answer to the twentieth-century border problems of Arabia. Military occupation of Oman and Buraimi by fewer than three thousand ill-trained, ill-disciplined local troops was not a long-term answer. Last summer, within less than two years, Oman was again in revolt. This time it was necessary to bring in British troops and planes to restore order—or rather to re-establish the *status quo ante* which with its unsettled boundary and oil disputes had caused all the trouble in the first place.

**I**F THE State Department had thrown its full support behind the British proposal in 1954, the Saudi government would unquestionably have accepted it. There would then have been no fighting either in 1955 or 1957 and the Soviet Union would not have had the opportunity to champion once again, for its own propaganda purposes, the cause of Arab nationalism before the United Nations.

Even more important, such a step, taken at that time, could have created the kind of confidence required by any joint British-American policy in the Middle East and so might have helped to brake the British go-it-alone mood that led to the Suez fiasco in 1956.

# George Kennan

## Updates His Diplomacy

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ON SIX SUCCESSIVE Sundays, George Kennan went before the mike of the BBC to read his carefully phrased Reith Lectures and, each time, some of his ideas found an immediate echo in the press and radio throughout the world. The thoughts of a lonely man who is not very much at home in his own land made top news in every country irrespective of its political order; his thoughts were translated and commented on in every language men use to communicate to each other their anguish about the survival of this earth. True, the reception of Kennan's ideas was spotty and selective, according to the prevailing prejudice and to the inclination everywhere to hear only what one wanted to hear. But unquestionably, the universal reverberations of Kennan's thoughts immensely heighten their relevance.

What Kennan said would not have carried half as far if he had not been an American diplomat-at-large. The very fact that he is known as a critic of John Foster Dulles helped. The leaders of our own administration during the last few years had done their best to train an audience for Kennan. They had been sermonizing the whole world about the sacredness of the individual, and here was a gifted, articulate individual freely exercising his sacred right to dissent. A thorough re-examination of our foreign and defense policies had lately been announced as imminent. Here was George Kennan earnestly trying to do exactly that job, speaking from London to the world on the basis of long experience and much thinking. He was not reading the report of a

committee or study group. He was following the truth as he saw it.

This invariably is a risky undertaking, and the brave man so inclined has no insurance against the danger of going out on a limb. This is exactly, in my opinion, what happened to George Kennan; yet I think that we all, and particularly those who disagree with him as thoroughly as I do, are in his debt. How can we ever hope to escape the oppressive heaviness of long-spent ideas hovering over us unless some men set out to reformulate the principles that must guide the inward and outward course of our nation? The workable, objective truths we need can be found only after the reports are in from earnest men who dare to think their thoughts through.

Incidentally, this is what the scientists call basic research. Here we are incomparably ahead of the Russians. There will never be a Muscovite Kennan speaking over Radio Peking.

### From Containment to Disengagement

Kennan admits that "the atomic deterrent has its value as a stabilizing factor . . ." until a more manageable form of balance of power is found or, as he puts it, "until we can evolve some better means of protection." Yet he has no confidence that the unending weapons race with Soviet Russia, the constant feverish devising of more powerful weapons and faster means of delivery, of new swords and new shields, can "in any way serve the purposes of a constructive and hopeful foreign policy." "Are we to flee like haunted creatures," he says in one of his most moving passages, "from one

defensive device to another, each more costly and humiliating than the one before, cowering underground one day, breaking up our cities the next, attempting to surround ourselves with elaborate electronic shields on the third, concerned only to prolong the length of our lives while sacrificing all the values for which it might be worth while to live at all?"

Obviously he has lost confidence in the "position of strength" theory; he does not believe that by constantly trying "to get a tiny bit ahead of the Russians" we can ultimately succeed in negotiating with them and reach a settlement on our terms.

Kennan here rejects a position that many of his Democratic friends still hold. Actually, if I understand him correctly, he rejects that theory of "containment" which he himself, in the "X" article in *Foreign Affairs*, formulated ten years ago. He then expressed his belief "that the Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy . . ."

During the last ten years, the Russian pressure has not found its match in adequate counterpressure from the West. Internal Russian development did not follow the course that Kennan's 1947 article had judged conceivable, and Russia did not "remain economically a vulnerable, and in a certain sense an impotent, nation, capable of exporting its enthusiasms and of radiating the strange charm of its primitive polit-