

Lawrence of Arabia's Legacy: Reality or a Mirage?

Chaz Goad

In 1917, a British Army Colonel named T.E. Lawrence would embark on a journey that would take him across the Middle East during the First World War. From Egypt to Jordan to Syria and Palestine, Lawrence would participate in military expeditions to defeat the Ottomans. This earned Lawrence a distinguished reputation in Arabia among the men he served with and against. The story of "Lawrence of Arabia" however, would not have reached the rest of the world without help from someone outside of Arabia. This help came from Lowell Thomas an American journalist who doubled as a part-time lecturer at Princeton University. The legend of "Lawrence of Arabia" became synonymous with the war in the Middle East and turn into one of the more interesting stories in history. While Thomas's depiction of T.E. Lawrence's exploits was partially true; Thomas used all the glamour and fantasy of a Hollywood movie to create this "legend" of Lawrence.

A better understanding of Lawrence's actual military achievements from the war can better show how his role in the Ottoman defeat was not what Thomas would depict. T.E. Lawrence had been enlisted to aid the British military in the region because of the knowledge he had obtained during his time as an archaeologist. His familiarity with local customs and language made Lawrence a valuable asset for the British armed forces. For the bulk of the World War I, Lawrence played a role in the Arab Revolt, which was an uprising of mainly Bedouin Arabs against the Ottoman Army. During the two years that Lawrence fought in the Arab Revolt much of his action was not in the direct confrontation with the Turkish Army, but instead he carried out operations that were meant to disrupt or delay Turkish supplies. Many of the operations were to cut telecommunication lines or destroy railways or bridges that were part of the Hejaz railway system that was used to transport supplies, munitions, or troop reinforcements. While this did in fact annoy and frustrate the Ot-

toman Army, most of these acts of sabotage were only temporary issues and would not stop or shift the overall operation of the Ottomans. Much of this information was sent through the proper channels, in this case the British Intelligence office in Cairo known as the “*Arab Bulletin*”, so that it could be provided and documented to and for the use of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. These reports would have been sent from Lawrence himself to the *Arab Bulletin*, yet as pointed by Linda J. Tarver in her article “In Wisdom’s House,”¹ many of the reports issued to the Bulletin and the account of events Lawrence would later use in his book “*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*” contradicted each other.

One of the most controversial events Lawrence described from his time in the Middle East occurred on October 20-21, 1917, when Lawrence and a single companion attempted a reconnaissance mission to observe the Diraa Station. Lawrence would later say in “*Seven Pillars*” that he had been captured, tortured and sexually assaulted by the station commander but escaped with the information. However, in his official report to the *Arab Bulletin* Lawrence never mentioned and it is absent from any other official report. Was Lawrence so embarrassed by this episode that he felt it necessary to leave it out or was he adding untrue detail to an event to add to his already colossal legend? While the true answer is probably lost forever, it does not appear that this was an isolated incident where Lawrence would have tampered with the details of an event. As Tarver noted, “In his official reports, his articles in the Arab Bulletin, his various letters to his family and friends, and his literary effort in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence deliberately utilized differences of chronology and perspective to create an inconsistent picture of himself.”² This raises another question: did Lawrence intentionally change events to add another level to his stories or did he simply forget events and try to recreate them to the best of his knowledge? Author J.T. Laird characterized Lawrence’s military career stating, “By itself, his career would never have brought him fame. The fame that subsequently came to him was a hot-house growth and a curious illustration of the effectiveness of American publicity techniques of the post-war period. The inventor of the Lawrence cult was the American journalist and propagandist, Lowell Thomas.”³ Lawrence’s military career was not one filled with bloody

¹ Linda J. Tarver “In Wisdom’s House: T.E. Lawrence in the Near East,” *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 13 (1978): 585-608.

² Tarver, 591.

³ J.T. Laird. “T.E. Lawrence: The Problem of Interpretation,” *The Australian Quarterly* Vol. 32 (1960): 94.

battles and large armies fighting for their lives but more of one that required a more surgical method in the attempt to defeat the Ottomans. Although, while Lawrence did carry out military action that aided in the defeat of the Ottomans, he was not the brilliant military commander who almost singlehandedly defeated the Ottomans, as legend would have it.

Lowell Thomas, an American journalist for the *Chicago Evening Journal* and also a part time lecturer at Princeton University had taken up an interest in documenting the war when the United States entered the conflict in April of 1917. His hope was to go to Europe, document the war and create an allied propaganda campaign for the U.S. as well as to create a collection of war travelogues. His trip to Europe would prove to be mostly a failure: the grim reality of the trench warfare and horrific setting of the European battlefield convinced Thomas that it was all simply too depressing and would not sell to any audience. His new plan was to travel to the Middle East and record the war in the desert. What attracted Thomas to this plan was, with the exotic scenery in the desert as well as the potential stories like General Edmund Allenby's crusade in Palestine the Arabian War seemed much more interesting and the complete opposite of the War in Europe. By the time Thomas and his cameraman Harry Chase had arrived in Palestine they had already heard the stories of Lawrence and his Arab army, Thomas eventually met Lawrence in early 1918 in Jerusalem. Thomas realized the story he had heard about a British Army Officer who dressed in Arab clothing, spoke Arabic, and was a commander of the Arab Revolt were in fact true, to him Lawrence's image alone was enough to attract his interest. Cameraman Harry Chase captured images of Lawrence in his attire as well as images of the Prince Faisal's Arab Army that he commanded. Lawrence biographer Ronald Florence has stated that, "Lawrence's meeting with Thomas in Jerusalem was the beginning of the transformation of the plucky Major Lawrence in his quaint Arab robes into the iconic Lawrence of Arabia."⁴

In the time Thomas followed Lawrence he recorded his actions in the war against the Ottomans. However, Thomas's trip to the Middle East lasted only two weeks before himself and Chase headed back to the United States. These stories consisted of night raids on unsuspecting Turkish garrisons, destruction of railways and communication lines and many instances where he and Lawrence were in deadly situations that

⁴ Ronald Florence, *Lawrence and Aaronsohn: T.E. Lawrence, Aaron Aaronsohn and the seeds of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, (London, Penguin Books), 2007, 358.

required Lawrence to personally kill Turkish troops in order to survive. The only problem with these stories was that Thomas never went on any mission with Lawrence in his two weeks in the Middle East and most certainly was never in danger of being killed. Florence states, “Thomas had a knack for stretching the truth... and never accompanied Lawrence and the Arab army.”⁵ These stories, while based on actual things Lawrence and his Arab counterparts did, were actually collected from the *Arab Bulletin* reports while the details of how dangerous and important they were was created in the mind of Lowell Thomas. After all, Thomas was a storyteller who needed a story to appeal to his audience; what difference did it make if the story was embellished to add some excitement? The problem caused by this embellishment was what turned Lawrence from a British soldier who fought alongside the Arabs to an unconquerable hero and military genius who without his presence the war in the Middle East could have ended much differently, possibly in Ottoman victory. Nevertheless, Thomas had his story and all of the information necessary to accomplish his goal of creating propaganda for the war, his job as a war correspondent was finished.

When Thomas returned to the United States the propaganda for the war was no longer necessary because the war was coming to a close. This left Thomas with his stories and photographs from his war experience to present in a lecture series. However, with the public interest in the war fading Thomas needed something different from the depressing images of the war that had disgusted the public. Of all of Thomas’s lectures that started in New York City at the Century Theater, “With Allenby in Palestine and the Conquest of Holy Arabia” would be the most popular of the group. The public immediately became fascinated with story of the blue-eyed Englishman in Arab clothing that fought against the oppressive Ottomans. Eventually, Thomas would rename his show to “With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia”, and the popularity of Lawrence would continue to grow. In America, Thomas’s story of Lawrence matched something that fit perfectly with American folklore. Lawrence in the American public was seen like some kind of old-west hero, a man from foreign land comes to a place (in this case Arabia) and takes up arms with the locals (Arabs) against some kind of evil oppressive force (Ottoman Empire) and ultimately defeats them. The Ottoman Empire was already not a popular entity in the U.S. because of the stories of what they had done to the Christian Armenians and how barbaric they were had made the Ottoman’s evil before they even heard Lawrence’s

⁵ Ibid, 425.

story. Throwing in Thomas's showmanship of being an exceptional speaker, adding orchestral music and special effects to his slide show made a spectacle of Thomas's presentation. As silly as it sounds it is easy to see why Lawrence would have appealed to the American public. Even though many of the details that Thomas had used to create Lawrence's image were false he had created a figure that had all the qualities and achievements of a modern day hero.

While Thomas's "Lawrence of Arabia" achieved a high level of popularity in the United States it would pale in comparison to the fandom it would achieve in England. British entertainment manager Percy Burton had seen one of Thomas's shows in New York and wanted to bring it to England. Thomas's show in England was the exact same demonstration that he had done, however the topic of British soldiers winning a great victory in the "Great War" naturally made interest very high. "With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia" became one of the most successful and popular entertainment events for an entire generation, it is not a stretch to say that it became an obsession for the people in London. As writer Karl E. Meyer has noted, "Thomas's presentation was scheduled to run for two weeks after its August debut. Yet so ravenous were British audiences for a redeeming heroic epilogue to a grisly war that he performed before a full house twice a day for five months."⁶ While the interest in Allenby and his crusade in Palestine was a hot topic, there was no denying that Lawrence and his legend had brought the people to the show. Lawrence biographer Joel Hodson has stated, "Thomas made Allenby of Palestine and Lawrence of Arabia into heroic figures to be measured alongside crusaders like Godfrey of Bouillon and Richard the Lion-Heart."⁷ For the British, Thomas had created a version of Lawrence that made him one of the most prominent and important military figures in their history, even though his actual contribution to winning the war was frankly minor. Lawrence had taken on the image of a historic crusader that could serve as an inspiration, for lack of a better term Lawrence had become a national treasure.

Even today, 96 years after the end of the First World War, Lawrence's legend has not faded in the least to any less popular of a status than it was. Numerous books about T.E. Lawrence have been written in

⁶ Karl E. Meyer & Shareen Blair Brysac. *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), 151.

⁷ Joel Hodson "Lowell Thomas, T.E. Lawrence and the Creation of a Legend," *American History* Vol. 35 (2000): 46.

this time and movies have been made to illustrate his journey in Arabia. In modern terms, if you were to go to any internet search engine and search “T.E.,” “Lawrence,” or even “Thomas Edward” T.E. Lawrence’s name will be the first item brought up, currently Amazon.com has 9,700 items that either are about Lawrence or mention him in some capacity. His place in history is secure in most of the world for the foreseeable future and the odds of Lawrence’s legacy losing its exposure of fame are long. For the British, T.E. Lawrence is arguably the most prevalent figure in their modern history with his only competition being former Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Although many books and articles have been written that criticize Lawrence and Thomas, they have done little to no damage to his legacy as one of the most important figures in the last 100 years.

T.E. Lawrence’s legend is one that consists of more fantasy than actual fact. While he does deserve credit for the role he played in the Ottoman defeat in World War I, it was just not simply enough to warrant him the fame as a military hero of the Middle East, and certainly not enough to depict him as a commander that won the war single handedly. Where he does deserve much credit was his work and failed effort trying to help the Arabs in the post-World War I Middle East establish themselves as independent, and not reliant on European rule. While he certainly is one of the more interesting figures from this time period, for him to be synonymous with the War in the Middle East is inaccurate and unfair. Since Lowell Thomas first depicted Lawrence mighty figure in an unrelenting conflict the attention and fandom of Lawrence has grown tremendously. However, a further look at Lawrence and his accomplishments simply do not warrant his insurmountable legacy. Therefore, Lowell Thomas is equally to blame for this godly depiction of Lawrence and his role in Arabia. If it were not for Thomas the legend of T.E. Lawrence may have stayed in the desert and most certainly there would not have been a “Lawrence of Arabia.”

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