

History of Suez Canal worth digging into

Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal

By Zachary Karabell

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Why another history of the Suez Canal, and why in 2003? Author Zachary Karabell never fully answers those questions. As a result, potential readers will have to approach this book as history for history's sake - in other words, with the assumption that history matters, and can be interesting to learn.

Karabell, who has a PhD in modern Middle Eastern studies from Harvard University, has built his writing career on that assumption. He is probably incongruously known for his book "The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election." It is a worthy account, though not particularly groundbreaking.

"Parting the Desert" carries Karabell back to his academic specialty. No matter how often told, the story of building the canal during the 1860s is a fascinating saga: of diplomacy involving primarily the French and the Egyptians, of raising gigantic sums of money, of overcoming massive geographical and technological obstacles long before the invention of mechanized earth-moving equipment.

The business aspects sometimes seem as if they are ripped from last month's headlines. Consider this passage about canal mastermind Ferdinand de Lesseps, an ambitious French diplomat: "Companies that continually promise their forecasts will be met tend to be punished by investors and the press when that doesn't happen. For years, Lesseps had indulged in Panglossian optimism. The project was always noble; the work was always proceeding wonderfully; and success was always imminent.

"Inept contractors, the die-hard opposition of the English prime minister, intrigues at Porte, cost overruns and cholera were presented as inconveniences . . . This attitude permeated the company and served it well, for a time . . . Then the company ran out of money."

Looked at through a pessimist's world view, the Suez Canal saga suggests long-term failure. The canal has not been at the center of world commerce or politics for at least 30 years. The Israeli and Egyptian governments no longer fight wars over control of the canal, and the number of cargo-carrying ships passing through the canal has dropped significantly.

Looked at through an optimist's world view, however, the canal is a monument to what can be achieved when enemies decide to lay aside warlike pettiness and place the welfare of peace-loving citizens first.