

American West Scholar Looks East

Dr. Jim Leiker rests on Mt. Sinai during his Fulbright-Hays scholarship.

Faculty

Dr. Jim Leiker is an associate professor of history whose expertise is race relations in the American West. But Leiker's studies took

a decided turn east when he was selected for a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship in summer 2007.

Leiker spent three weeks in Egypt and three weeks in Israel during an immersion in the culture and history of both countries. The Fulbright-Hays group of 16 Americans were given the opportunity to meet with university professors, journalists, politicians and religious leaders.

"Intellectually, it was an incredible experience," Leiker said. "I think most Americans' conceptions of the Middle East, if they don't come from the media, come from the Bible or other Judeo-Christian traditions. We acknowledge those places as part of our religious heritage so I can't over-emphasize how moving it can be to see them. However, we also tend to have simplistic romantic images of how these places and people are supposed to look. We forget that real people are living there with contemporary problems – urbanization, poverty and religious extremism."

As a result of the Fulbright-Hays experience, Leiker met Dr. Mounira Soliman, who has been invited to be JCCC's scholar in residence March 31-April 4 (see story page 7).

Leiker's interest in the Middle East was piqued during his involvement with the development of a Middle East history class and with the U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant to infuse Islamic studies into the JCCC curriculum. Leiker is teaching JCCC's first *History of the Middle East* class in spring 2008.

Asked about the benefits of the experience, Leiker said, "I gained an appreciation of the disparities between two very different countries – Egypt, a Muslim society with a secular government, and Israel, a Jewish society with amazing internal diversity."

Leiker believes that his background in U.S. Western history was an asset.

"When you teach the American West or write about it, you deal with aridity and indigenous people – the American Indians," Leiker said. "Wherever I went in Israel and Egypt, lack of water seemed to be a constant. It's a resource more precious than gold, especially as it affects growing populations."

"I also saw in Israel views similar to settlement of the American West. When white pioneers came West, they saw open free land, available for the taking. They didn't see the people who were already living there. A similar attitude prevails in Israel: 'Before we came to Palestine, it was a wasteland; we have been the ones to improve it.' But Arab Palestinians say, 'We were always here. We built mosques, cultivated Islam and defended this land from Crusaders.' In Israel, as in most places, one is constantly confronted with dueling versions of history."

Leiker says the Fulbright offices in both countries gave balanced views. Scholars were exposed to tourist attractions, scientific research centers and universities, as well as areas of poverty and religious dissension.

"Before this trip, I thought of myself as a cultural relativist," Leiker said. "What I learned is that I really am an American with an American's typical naive attitude that with enough reason, any problem can be solved. What I saw with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was sobering because I realized that some problems are too complicated to be fixed. They simply have to be survived. The people of the Middle East have my respect for the issues they confront day-by-day, hour-by-hour." 