

The Foreign Policy Debate We Need

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How to temper idealism with the demands of responsible statecraft—without abandoning our commitment to democracy and human rights? This is the question facing America’s foreign policy hands as they look beyond the Trump presidency.

This past December, the U.S. Senate joined the House of Representatives in recognizing as genocide the Ottoman Empire’s killing of some one and a half million Armenians in 1915. Former President Barack Obama’s Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, penned a column for the *New York Times*, congratulating the U.S. Congress for doing, at long last, the right thing. There had for decades been a historical consensus that the destruction of the Armenian community in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire constituted genocide, and Power was right to affirm it. She was further justified in declaring the Congressional vote a personal victory.

The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir

Samantha Power
Dey Street Books, 2019, 592 pp.,
\$29.99

The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal

William J. Burns
Random House, 2019, 512 pp.,
\$32.00

As she describes in her recent memoir, *The Education of an Idealist*, Power worked overtime expending moral suasion to convince Obama’s White House to press for this recognition. She documents her efforts to have Obama declare his support during a state visit to Turkey. She was unable to overcome the President’s unwillingness then. But is she right to believe that her *idealpolitik* has triumphed today?

Congress’s recognition last month of the genocide was hardly the result of some moral catharsis. Rather, it was the decision of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to purchase the Russian missile complex S-400, and his military offensive against the Kurds in Northern Syria, that impelled and (at last) incentivized Congress to act: *Idealpolitik* was expressed after all, but for reasons of *realpolitik*. The question to pose is whether America’s recognition of the Armenian genocide was a sign of America’s high-mindedness or of Washington’s hypocrisy. Was the vote in Congress in actuality a victory, or a defeat of Power’s vision of foreign policy as a moral choice?

Fulminations against the hypocrisy of the West, and liberalism more generally, can be heard today in all corners of the globe. Plaintiffs charge that the West, the United States in particular, is guilty of imposing its social and political model as a universal norm, deploying the language of liberal values to paper over its hegemonic power ambitions, and selectively impugning illiberalism depending on its own economic and military interests. This obsession with hypocrisy is a common trait among very different ideological actors. Political subjects as different as the radical left and right in the EU, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, jihadists in the Middle East and anti-imperialists in Latin America, all share a worldview that the final act of the West’s morality play is embodied in its double standards. A global war on liberalism has taken the form of a war on hypocrisy.

In this context, the fate of *idealpolitik* in an age of state-sponsored cynicism merits closer examination. How is one to balance the desire to be on the right side of history with the obligation to do no harm and to promote effectively a nation's interests? This has been a central question in foreign policy from Hans Morgenthau to George Kennan, and it will quite likely find its apotheosis in a post-Trump America, whenever that time arrives, by an anti-Trump generation mistrustful of American power but inclined to view political questions as moral ones. It is because of this that Samantha Power's memoir should be of particular interest for those seeking to ascertain the future of American foreign policy.

Samantha Power's reflections can be profitably read in conjunction with another recent memoir, by career diplomat and former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns. Burns's *The Back Channel* and Power's *The Education of an Idealist* are, in our view, the two most important books by Obama's senior foreign policy officials, and neatly demarcate the choices America's foreign policy will face in the next decade. These choices, always contingent on the state of geopolitics, will now be further constrained by Trump's dismal legacy in foreign affairs, namely the loss of America's global authority. (The United States, of course, had already lost its hegemonic role before Trump took office.)

Samantha Power is a gifted writer. Her style is personal and sculpted with passion. She knows implicitly that penning a memoir requires a form very much the opposite of preparing remarks for a hearing in the Senate. If upon her confirmation to become Barack Obama's ambassador to the UN she followed the advice of Kevin Costner's character in *Bull Durham*—"You're gonna have to learn your clichés...they are your friends"—in writing her memoirs she has jettisoned those clichés. Power emerges from the book to be ambitious, talented, yet somehow vulnerable.

Power is the poster child of the human rights decade—the 1990s—when America was so strong that the world's problems were debated as moral questions in Washington. But the fall of the Berlin Wall, arguably the watershed moment for 1990s *Pax Americana* policymaking, was not the event that sparked Power's interest in politics. It was instead the tragedy at Tiananmen.

Power's political sensibility was informed by a belief that America is in the end responsible for all of the great wrongs that transpire in the world, and that it has not only the strength but the obligation to prevent them. She cut her teeth as a war reporter in the Balkans who dreamt of being a prosecutor bringing ethnic cleansers and *genocidaires* to justice. Indeed, she wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on genocide, in which the bystander (in her moral universe) carries the same share of blame as the perpetrator for many of the 20th century's catastrophes. Her enduring faith is in American exceptionalism: America's exceptional strength and responsibility to do what's just. Yet it is Samantha Power's—and her generation's—desire to be on the right side of history that helps to explain some of the cardinal missteps of Obama's foreign policy and the consequent geopolitical world in which we live.

In his famous lecture "Politics as a Vocation," Max Weber described an "ethic of conviction"—a quasi-religious drive to do what is thought to be right at all costs. It's a concept that looms large today for those appalled by the amorality of transactional politics. Power's aspiration is to be a diplomat-activist that partly makes her a darling to a new generation of Democratic Party foreign policy hands (even as her belief that American strength—particularly America's military might—can be a force for good separates her from

this same generation). But Weber contrasted the “ethic of conviction” with an “ethic of responsibility”—the idea that politicians should be judged not on the motives that pushed them to undertake certain actions but on the consequences of their actions. This concept holds the key to the major—if inadvertent—lesson of Power’s book: Idealism is effective only when it understands how power operates—particularly when it recognizes the *limits* of American power. Power’s desire to effect normative change around the globe seems genuine, but her grasp of politics is problematic. It is never clear whether her judgments are analytical arguments or normative propositions. Was her conviction, for example, that Assad “must go” a conclusion made after assessing the constellation of powers in Syria, or was it based on the normative assumption that people like Assad should not be allowed to govern?

The Arab Spring of 2011-12, Power contends, was the most influential geopolitical development of Obama’s two terms. The uprisings were also the moment when Obama’s younger advisers, including Power, were confident that they had studiously learned the lessons of 1989 and of Bosnia, and sought to prove that idealism, rather than cool geopolitical calculation, would be the force that wins the day. Such good intentions, we know, came up terribly short, and the world we today face is the result not only of George W. Bush’s calamitous war in Iraq, but also a consequence of Barack Obama’s foreign policy—a foreign policy fissured by the idealistic drive of his advisers and the circumspect instincts of their boss. This also helps explain why swaths of the American public were ready to accept Trump’s foolish claim that the United States is the biggest loser of the post-Cold War liberal order, and that American exceptionalism’s conceit of being on the right side of history (whatever that may ultimately mean) is not America’s strength but its vulnerability.

Samantha Power’s worldview consists of only three requisite actors: the American public, the American government, and the bad guys. What Power saw as her main responsibility both as a journalist and as a diplomat was to make public opinion and the government concur that America must do the right thing. Any reasonable claim of foreign policy complexity is, for her, a pretext for inaction. But it is this crusade for moral clarity that became the biggest weakness of the young idealists. America’s policy towards Libya is the best example. In search of a righteous policy move, Power and her allies failed to realize what the effect of Qaddafi’s removal would be on the non-proliferation regime, and neglected to understand that by removing him, they decided the fate not only of the Libyan strongman, but also of Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, the world leader who Obama had called a dear friend at the end of his first term.

In this context, reading Burns’s *Back Channel* alongside Power may be a salutary exercise for any aspiring American policymaker. Burns is a good writer on his own terms. Unlike Power’s memoir, which reads like a novel, his own reflections read like a diplomatic cable—but one penned with lucidity, deep understanding, and elegance. Power’s world is populated by activists, villains, and bystanders; Burns’s by adversaries that should be turned into partners and allies that should be kept as allies.

Burns’s “realism with a moral face” is a necessary corrective to a foreign policy predicated on conviction and moral rectitude. Unlike Power, Burns received his political education in the last years of the Cold War, and a quiet determination to apprehend the constraints of others is the focus of his diplomacy. Burns admires George H.W. Bush’s Secretary of State, James Baker, for his capacity to resist triumphalism at the Cold War’s end, and to recognize that less powerful nations always have legitimate interests.

In Burns's world, diplomacy seldom resolves problems, but it could be instrumental in managing them. Strewn throughout his memoir are the interests of states and the interests with which America contends. For Burns, getting the other side right is no less important than the noble drive to be on the right side of history. His realism is the antipode of cynicism or inaction.

In an unintended echo of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a new DC-based think tank, Burns makes abundantly clear that "the militarization of diplomacy is a trap." He also declaims against the idealism inherent in the hubris of "nation-building" activities. "It sometimes seemed," Burns avers, "as if we were trying to replicate the role of the nineteenth-century British Colonial Service." He bristles at the notion of "American indispensability," an assumption that Power accepts, and has myriad pages in his index dedicated to Israel/Palestine, compared with no mention at all in Power's, an absence as distressing as it is unfathomable.

How to marry Samantha Power's understanding that to govern is to capture the imagination of the public with Burns's view that the task of diplomacy is not simply winning but facilitating an order accepted by others? This, in our estimation, is the debate that must happen for the future of American foreign policy, in a world in which America is less trusted than before, less feared than before, no less hated than before—but, because of all this, more needed than before.

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