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FOREIGN POLICY ON THE REBOUND

Oxford University Press, 336 pages, $24.95

Whether selecting a spouse or a president, doing so on the rebound often ends up badly. Americans were so exhausted from the scandals of the Nixon Administration, with which they also associated President Gerald Ford, that they chose the un-Nixon: squeaky clean and morally pure Jimmy Carter. Thus they exchanged a strategically vigorous foreign policy for what would turn out to be a conflicted and spineless one. Likewise, Americans were so exhausted by the protracted wars that George W. Bush had gotten the nation into that they chose the un-Bush: Barack Obama, someone openly apologetic about America’s role in the world. The result was to exchange an overly assertive foreign policy for an overly unassertive one. Prudence and moderation were sacrificed for momentary emotional satisfaction.

Colin Dueck, an associate professor at George Mason University and the author of two earlier books on American foreign policy, has something like this in the back of his mind, even if he doesn’t refer to it directly, in The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today. This is no right-wing hit job against the 44th president; it is a thorough, meticulous, non-polemical accounting of what Obama’s goals have been regarding America and the world, and what he has been able to achieve. There are relatively few gotcha lines here. The text is sensibly measured. Dueck is on the center-Right, I would imagine. He aims for persuasion, not annihilation. And not only does he persuade the reader that Obama’s foreign policy, while seeking grand results, has been at best mediocre; he also dissects the various philosophical strains in Republican foreign policy, offering a bracing yet moderate fusion of them all that is both responsible and suited for winning the 2016 election.

Dueck’s thesis is that Obama’s first priority has been domestic policy: here is where the president has sought not modest change but truly transformational change, which, among other things, has included significant steps towards national health care and towards a transfer of wealth from the higher economic classes to the lower ones. Obama, as the author observes, has in this sense actually been more like Ronald Reagan, another transformational president, than like his fellow Democrat Bill Clinton, who elevated deal-making above any overarching vision. In order to accomplish this ambitious domestic vision, as well as compensate for the overly aggressive foreign policy of his Republican predecessor, Obama has in a very calculating manner pursued a foreign policy of “retrenchment and accommodation” (Dueck’s italics). This has been Obama’s grand strategy, Dueck argues, a plan of matching broad national ends with available means. Clinton had no grand strategy, and Obama can be considered a more serious foreign policy president simply because he has one. That he has been more serious, of course, does not necessarily mean he has better served the country’s interests.

As examples of Obama’s seriousness, Dueck details the determined troop withdrawal from Afghanistan beginning in 2011 and the perhaps deliberate failure in 2010 to achieve a status-of-forces agreement with the
Iraqi government. The latter move left Iraq with no U.S. troops to help sustain central control, thereby undoing the concrete gains made there during the last two years of the Bush presidency. Iraq experienced the worst of American leadership: an invasion whose aftermath under one president was insufficiently thought through, followed by an impulsive, politically motivated withdrawal under his successor. This withdrawal, moreover, may have owed more to domestic than to international priorities, since it symbolically telegraphed to the home front that the Iraq war was over and nation-building at home could redouble. Obama certainly had a strategy, and that strategy played a part in deepening Iraq’s chaos and enabling the subsequent rise of the Islamic State.

In Egypt, even if President Hosni Mubarak’s rule “was bound to end,” writes Dueck, the Obama Administration’s tactic of undermining both him and the Egyptian army while, in effect, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood was unwise in the extreme. It amounted to the desertion of a tried and tested ally in order to offer a helping hand to a hateful adversary in a country that had “little historical experience with liberal democracy.” In Libya, “Obama adopted a policy of regime change in 2011, followed by a de facto policy of US disengagement and nonintervention.” The result was strategic incoherence that hastened a slide into anarchy. As for the so-called pivot to Asia, Dueck notes that “because of deep overall cuts to the US Navy, a higher percentage of existing American vessels deployed to East Asia amounts to no significant increase in actual numbers.... To think that the Chinese have not noticed this distinction would be absurd.”

Dueck is perhaps most effective in pointing out Obama’s naivete on the issue of nuclear weapons. The president seeks to cut back the number of nuclear weapons both as a matter of principle and because he believes that other nations will follow suit. In fact, states aspiring to nuclear weapons do not care whether or not the United States is cutting back on its nuclear weapons, since they want to develop their own for reasons of status, geopolitics, and regional security. International relations, Dueck patiently writes, do not usually reward broad, a priori concessions. I might add that occasional gestures of goodwill tended to work better during the Cold War, when formal alliances were in place that entailed obligations and treaty negotiations. We now have a less organized world, where a structured reciprocity is harder to come by.

Obama has certainly been ruthless in some spheres, most notably in his relentless campaign of drone-delivered assassinations against Islamic terrorists. But his wider policy of retrenchment is possibly connected to his formative years in a rather cosmopolitan, international setting, often outside the mainland United States. He may not feel nation-state America in his bones quite to the degree of some previous presidents, and thus takes a more modest view of America’s place in global geopolitics. He grew up in an atmosphere of America Lite, and so may be comfortable with a post-American world. His fervent desire for a successful understanding with Iran over nuclear weapons is a case in point. Obama does not see this as appeasement at all, but as a legitimate vehicle to create a more stable relationship with a regional power, reducing the possibility of America’s having to send troops in significant numbers back to the Middle East. In all of this he is serious, calculating, and forward-thinking. The question for historians will be whether his seriousness has furthered American interests.

In Obama’s defense, I would argue that the chaos we see today in the greater Middle East, the renewal of Cold War-style conflict in Europe, and the rise of Chinese sea power in the South and East China Seas have much to do with historical undercurrents that are difficult for a U.S. president to alter. The collapse or weakening of suffocating totalitarianisms in Libya, Syria, and Iraq has left an utter void in political organization in these places. Bush toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq, but Bashar al-Assad in Syria has been violently undermined by indigenous causes. There may never have been the possibility of soft landings for such politically pulverizing Baathist regimes. As for Europe, the favorable geopolitical situation in the 1990s was made possible by Russia’s very convenient state of disorganization, caused by the systemic shock of the Soviet Union’s collapse. And Vladimir Putin’s rise and his aggression have been partially facilitated, until recently, by high energy prices. In Asia, decades of capitalist-style expansion have facilitated China’s return as a formidable military power. Given all of this, it is a mistake to believe that the United States is in control of world events. It certainly is not; and too many journalists, intellectuals, and policy analysts have not internalized this. Nevertheless, through deft decision-making at pivotal moments, America can still affect the trajectory of international relations.

So how to navigate a world in the throes of intense geopolitics played out during an age of globalization? Dueck neatly divides Republicans into “conservative anti-interventionists,” “conservative internationalists,” and “conservative nationalists,” who run the gamut from neo-isolationism to muscular Wilsonian interventionism. The fusion of all of these that Dueck comes up with is “conservative American realism,” which would robustly support American allies, counter American adversaries, bolster deterrence, and emphasize strategic planning. In spirit, it would be analogous to Walter Russell Mead’s “Jacksonian” foreign policy tradition, which is skeptical of nation-building and spreading democracy, but takes a no-nonsense approach to dealing with America’s enemies and hunting down those who attack us, or plan to attack us. This is a foreign policy sensibility that our elites do not articulate well, but which many Americans feel deeply.

No new administration, especially if it is Republican, should plan a transition strategy without this book. As for my own advice, I would add the following:

First, if you invade or help topple a regime on Wednesday, please have a plan for Thursday. Of course, you cannot know the exact ending of a conflict when you embark on it. And to demand such knowledge would immobilize moral action. But you must have a coherent, well-staffed-out strategy, nevertheless.

Second, even though the Iraq war was a disaster, and even though the bar must be set extremely high for the involvement of significant numbers of American troops in any future conflict, this does not mean we will never need to intervene again. So don’t make decisions on the rebound—don’t impulsively do the opposite of what you did before. Each situation will be unique, and to tack through the shifting winds will require the same practical wisdom.

Robert D. Kaplan is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and the author of 16 books on foreign affairs and travel, including In Europe’s Shadow: Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond, to be published in February by Random House.
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