

Foreign Policy Fueled by Fantasy

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By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

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In an extensive interview with Barack Obama in the April issue of The Atlantic, journalist Jeffrey Goldberg recounts a rebuke that the president delivered to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli leader had been explaining “the dangers of the brutal region in which he lives,” when Obama cut in.

“Bibi, you have to understand something,” the president said. “I’m the African-American son of a single mother, and I live here, in this house. I live in the White House. I managed to get elected president of the United States. You think I don’t understand what you’re talking about, but I do.”

Obama apparently not only believes that his distinctive background and powers of persuasion—rather than, say, a solid grounding in foreign languages, comparative politics and economics, and diplomatic and military history—equip him to *understand* the geopolitical complexities of tumultuous, faraway regions. Moreover, he and his inner circle also seem to have been convinced since before he was elected president that his personal qualities and special experiences would enable him to *change* the world. In February 2015 in Foreign Policy, James Traub reported, “Obama, and those closest to him, believed that his voice, his (non-white) face, his story, could help usher the people of the world to a higher plane.”

Notwithstanding his pretensions to have inaugurated a new era in America’s foreign affairs, the 44th president’s conduct of foreign policy represents an unwitting continuation of, and also brings an unintended close to, an era that encompasses the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

That surprising claim is central to Michael Mandelbaum’s superb new book, “Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era.” Mandelbaum’s bold title evokes Bush’s speech on May 1, 2003, on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln—an aircraft carrier recently returned from the Persian Gulf. Scarcely six weeks after American-led forces opened fire against Saddam Hussein’s regime, Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq. The banner behind the president proclaimed “Mission Accomplished.” As Iraq descended into sectarian and religious violence, the banner became a symbol for many of Bush administration naiveté and hubris.

Mandelbaum contends, however, that the failure to bring democracy to Iraq does not distinguish the Bush administration from the preceding post-Cold War administration or the one that followed. Like Bush, Mandelbaum shows, Clinton and Obama pursued foreign policies that elevated the advancement of American values over the pursuit of vital national security interests. In their efforts to transform regimes, Mandelbaum concludes, all three presidents failed.

Mandelbaum is a professor of international relations at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a prolific author of serious and accessible books on American foreign policy, and—having been educated at Yale, King’s College, Cambridge, and Harvard, and having enjoyed a long tenure as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations—a product of the American foreign policy establishment. Yet Mandelbaum’s trenchant assessment of American foreign policy from the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s to the Russian conquest of the Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 as a series of failures could not be better calculated to outrage the foreign policy establishment.

The U.S. inclination to use “the formidable power with which it emerged from the conflict with the Soviet Union” to liberalize and democratize regimes was, according to Mandelbaum, “distinctive and unprecedented.” To be sure, the American impulse to improve others stretches back to the nation’s Puritan forebears who sought to build a political order that would serve as a model to the world, and it extends through the whole of American history. But the traditional aim of foreign policy—to provide security in a dangerous world—dominated American thinking from the nation’s founding through the Cold War, when the aim was “containment” of Soviet communism. The tremendous new power America enjoyed as a result of its victory in the Cold War and its emergence as the world’s lone superpower, however, provided the luxury of embracing a new goal—“transformation.”

Mandelbaum deftly recounts the numerous missions across three presidencies in which America has sought to transform other countries’ internal politics. The Clinton administration sought to foster human rights in China, democracy in Russia, and regime change in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. It failed in every case.

The Bush administration endeavored to build free and democratic governments in Afghanistan and Iraq in the hope of transforming the greater Middle East. It failed.

Like the Clinton and Bush administrations, the Obama administration strove to bring peace to the Israelis and the Palestinians. And it failed.

Mandelbaum appreciates the benefits that would accrue to the United States from success in such missions. The problem with the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations and the foreign policy elites that advised them, he argues, is that they overestimated America’s capacity to accomplish these goals.

In China and Russia the missions failed, according to Mandelbaum, because Beijing and Moscow “were able to resist the kinds of changes the United States was trying to introduce.” In Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the mission failure “stemmed from the absence of the social conditions necessary to support the public institutions the United States hoped to install.”

With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, three presidential administrations failed because Palestinian leadership—first under Yasser Arafat and for the last 11 years under Mahmoud Abbas—declined to build transparent and accountable political institutions and even encouraged fellow Palestinians to regard a Jewish state of any size or shape in the land of Israel as irredeemably illegitimate.

In sum, three successive administrations have too often viewed the world not as it is but as they wish it to be. Obama’s and his team’s conviction that his multicultural background and electoral success uniquely enable him to conduct America foreign policy is only the latest source of such error.

If Mandelbaum is correct that the rise of Chinese adventurism and Russian irredentism reaffirms the primacy of power politics even as America retains an interest in prudently employing the nation’s highly limited tools to back the forces of freedom around the world, then the United States can ill afford a foreign policy nourished by fantasy.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.