



Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower

By Zbigniew Brzezinski

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America's most distinguished commentator on foreign policy, former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, offers a reasoned but unsparing assessment of the last three presidential administrations' foreign policy. Though spanning less than two decades, these administrations cover a vitally important turning point in world history: the period in which the United States, having emerged from the Cold War with unprecedented power and prestige, managed to squander both in a remarkably short time. This is a tale of decline: from the competent but conventional thinking of the first Bush administration, to the well-intentioned self-indulgence of the Clinton administration, to the mortgaging of America's future by the "suicidal statecraft" of the second Bush administration. Brzezinski concludes with a chapter on how America can regain its lost prestige. This scholarly yet highly opinionated book is sure to be both controversial and influential.

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Editorial Review

Review

"No one understands the interdependence of power and principle better than Zbigniew Brzezinski." Jimmy Carter "This excellent short book... is about more than errors of the present administration's foreign policy. George W. Bush certainly comes in for searing criticism, not least over Iraq and his one-sided approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. But what makes Mr Brzezinski's account interesting - and, in parts, intellectually demanding - is the sense it makes of the great swirl of shifting forces that set the context." Financial Times "It goes against the grain of much commentary confined within the parameters of established US thinking on the subject." Irish Times "In his compelling new book...Mr. Brzezinski not only assesses the short- and long-term fallout of the Iraq war, but also puts that grim situation in perspective... the author writes with a keen understanding of the ways in which military or political actions in one part of the world can affect developments in another region...Mr. Brzezinski's verdict on the current president's record - 'catastrophic,' he calls it - is nothing short of devastating" New York Times "Brzezinski has described the challenge of future American leadership with unusual clarity." Washington Post"

About the Author

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, is a counselor and trustee at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a professor of American foreign policy at the School of Advanced International Studies, the Johns Hopkins University, both located in Washington, D.C. His many books include *The Choice* and *The Grand Chessboard*. He lives in Washington, D.C.

From The Washington Post

Reviewed by James M. Lindsay

The Iraq war has America's foreign policy mavens waxing nostalgic. Partisans of the elder George Bush long for the days when realism and caution reigned in the White House. Bill Clinton's fans fondly recall an era when presidential trips overseas drew admiring crowds rather than angry protesters. U.S. foreign policy, it would seem, should go forward by going backward.

Zbigniew Brzezinski will have none of that. In his engaging and briskly argued new book, Jimmy Carter's national security adviser sees little worth emulating in the past 15 years of U.S. foreign policy. He asks how Washington has led since becoming the world's first truly global leader after the collapse of the Soviet Union. His answer? "In a word, badly."

To make that case, Brzezinski grades the performance of presidents Bush, Clinton and Bush -- or, to use the ungainly terms he prefers, Global Leaders I, II and III. Second Chance even comes complete with a full-blown report card. (You can guess which president gets an F.) Brzezinski's unsparing assessments will warm the heart of anyone worried about grade inflation.

George H.W. Bush, Brzezinski argues, was a superb crisis manager who missed the opportunity to leave a lasting imprint on U.S. foreign policy because he was not a strategic visionary. He earns a solid B. On the other hand, Bill Clinton had the intellect to craft just such a post-Cold War strategy but lacked the discipline and the passion, leading to eight years that produced more drift than direction. He gets an uneven C. Finally, the younger Bush offered "catastrophic leadership" after 9/11 that has already stamped his "presidency as a historical failure."

These portraits will strike many readers as conventional -- and others as unfair, particularly to the first Bush. Yes, Bush 41 famously foundered with the "vision thing." But then again, less than a year passed between the Soviet Union's demise and his reelection defeat -- not much time to devise, let alone institutionalize, a new world order. And it goes beyond unfair to argue, as Brzezinski does, that had the elder Bush deposed Saddam Hussein when he had the chance in 1991, "a subsequent U.S. president might not have gone to war in Iraq." The younger Bush chose to wage war on Iraq; he was not forced into it by the choices his father made.

So much for the grades. So what does looking backward tell us about going forward? Brzezinski believes that George W. Bush's choices have been calamitous but not fatal. There's still no other country that can play the role of global leader. So America will get a second chance -- but not a third -- to reclaim the mantle of global leadership.

As much as Second Chance criticizes Global Leaders I, II and III for failing to devise a sensible geopolitical strategy, it does not offer one of its own. The few specific policy recommendations it does offer are unconvincing. Brzezinski wants to establish an executive-legislative planning mechanism to inject greater coherence into foreign policy. But this proposal fails to realize that consensus can produce bad policies as well as good ones. After all, we plunged into Iraq in 2003 because Congress followed rather than resisted the White House's lead.

Brzezinski also wants "stricter lobbying laws" because ethnic lobbies have too tight a hold on Uncle Sam's ear. But this exaggerates their importance. Yes, lobbying groups favoring countries such as Israel, Armenia, Greece and Taiwan complicate the lives of policymakers, but they seldom prove decisive on major issues. When they do -- as in the case of the Israel lobby, which Brzezinski believes distorts U.S. policy in the Middle East -- it is not because they mobilize narrow interests but because they can mobilize a broad swath of public opinion. That, for better or worse, is what democracy is all about.

What Second Chance does offer is a wise insight that should guide any effort to fashion a strategy to restore American leadership. We are in the midst of what Brzezinski rightly calls a "global political awakening." Technology has made global "have-nots" painfully conscious of their relative deprivation. It has also given them the tools to punish those they see as blocking their aspirations. If the United States is to avoid becoming the target of their resentment, its foreign policy must be seen as serving their interests as well as its own. That means exercising self-restraint rather than pressing every advantage that comes to a superpower; it means listening to others and not just working to preserve our own peace and prosperity but helping others to build their own. The Global Leader IV who can find a way to translate these precepts into practical policies should be able to impress even the redoubtable Prof. Brzezinski.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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