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Impossible Missions

Thomas L. Friedman APRIL 6, 2016

I just read a book that Barack Obama and Donald Trump would both enjoy.

It argues that the last two decades of U.S. foreign policy were an aberration — an era when America became so overwhelmingly more powerful than any rival that it got geopolitically drunk and decided that it didn't just want to be a cop on the beat protecting our nation, but also a social worker, architect and carpenter doing nation-building abroad.

It was all done with the best of intentions, and in some cases did save precious lives. But none of the efforts achieved the kind of self-sustaining democratizing order we wanted, which is why neither this president nor the next wants to be doing any more of that — if they can at all avoid it.

But can they?

The book is called “Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era,” by the Johns Hopkins foreign policy professor Michael Mandelbaum, and it's going to be one of the most talked about foreign policy books of the year.

Beginning with the 1991 decision of the first Bush administration to intervene in northern Iraq and create a no-fly zone to protect the Iraqi Kurds from their country's

genocidal leader, Saddam Hussein, “the principal international initiatives of the United States” for the next two decades “concerned the internal politics and economics rather than the external behavior of other countries,” writes Mandelbaum, with whom I co-wrote a book in 2011, “That Used to Be Us.”

“The main focus of American foreign policy shifted from war to governance, from what other governments did beyond their borders to what they did and how they were organized within them,” writes Mandelbaum, referring to U.S. operations in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan and toward Chinese human rights policy, Russian democratization policy, NATO expansion and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

“The United States after the Cold War ... became the equivalent of a very wealthy person, the multibillionaire among nations,” he argues. “It left the realm of necessity that it had inhabited during the Cold War and entered the world of choice. It chose to spend some of its vast reserves of power on the geopolitical equivalent of luxury items; the remaking of other countries.”

In each case, “the United States sought to make the internal governance of the countries with which it became entangled more like its own democratic, constitutional order and those of its Western allies,” Mandelbaum adds. “In the Cold War the United States aimed at containment; in the post-Cold War [the thrust] was transformation. The Cold War involved the defense of the West; post-Cold War foreign policy aspired to the political and ideological extension of the West.”

These missions, he notes, all aimed “to convert not simply individuals but entire countries,” and they had one other thing in common: “They all failed.”

Don’t get him wrong, Mandelbaum says. The U.S. beat back some very bad actors in Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, and later in Libya. “The *military* missions that the United States undertook succeeded. It was the *political* missions that followed, the efforts to transform the politics of the places where American arms prevailed, that failed.”

Why? Because political success was never within our control. Such normative transformations can only come from within, from the will of local actors to change

long-embedded habits, overcome longstanding enmities or restore long-lost political traditions.

In each of these cases, argues Mandelbaum, political transformation “was up to them — and they were not up to it.”

After having supported one of these initiatives — Iraq — precisely in the hope that it could be transformative, it’s hard to dispute Mandelbaum’s conclusion. But that then raises other big questions, starting with: Who will keep order in these places?

In earlier historical epochs the world relied on imperial powers to come in and control zones of weak governance, as the Ottomans did for 500 years in the Middle East. Then it relied on colonial powers. Then it relied on homegrown kings, colonels and dictators to maintain order.

But what if we’re now in a post-imperial, post-colonial and post-authoritarian age? The kings, colonels and dictators of old did not have to deal with amplified citizens deeply connected to one another and the world with smartphones. The old autocrats also had vast oil resources or aid from superpowers in the Cold War to buy off their people. What if they now have bulging populations, dwindling oil revenues and can’t buy off their people or shut them up?

The only option is more consensual government and social contracts among equal citizens. But that gets us back to Mandelbaum’s argument: What if it’s up to them and they’re not up to it — and the result is growing disorder and more and more of their people fleeing to the world of order in Europe or North America?

Then we may have to find a way to help them at a cost we can afford — even if we don’t know how. This will be one of the biggest foreign policy challenges facing the next president, which is why this book is a must-read for him or her.

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