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American Power in Theory and Practice

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American Power in Theory and Practice

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Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For

BY SUSAN RICE. Simon & Schuster, 2019, 544 pp.

The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir
BY SAMANTHA POWER. Dey Street Books, 2019, 592 pp.

The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House

BY BEN RHODES. Random House, 2018, 428 pp.

The events that Susan Rice and Samantha Power describe in their new memoirs of their time in the Obama administration occurred only a few years ago. But they belong to a different age.

“That chart shook up the Principals Committee like nothing I have seen before or since,” Rice writes in *Tough Love*. The chart estimated the number of people the Ebola virus might kill in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Rice, then national security adviser, goes on to describe how she helped convince the Pentagon to send almost 3,000 U.S. troops to West Africa to

fight the plague. To convince other nations to join the effort, she, President Barack Obama, and various cabinet officials “made scores of calls to incredulous counterparts” in foreign governments. For her part, Power, then ambassador to the United Nations, disregarded the pleas of her young son—who cried, “Mommy, I’m certain you will bring back Bola”—and flew to Liberia and Sierra Leone under strict medical supervision to help oversee the effort. Back at the White House, in an attempt to counteract mounting hysteria about the disease, Obama hosted Nina Pham, a Texas nurse who had been successfully treated for Ebola. When she arrived at the Oval Office, he greeted her with a hug.

During the Obama administration, U.S. policymakers afforded Africa a level of concern and respect that was unprecedented in American history and is unimaginable in the Trump era. This attention to Africa reflected not merely a geographic orientation but an ideological one: a belief that human security, even in the poorest and weakest of states, matters to U.S. national security.

Rice, who began her career working on Africa policy in the Clinton administration, made eight official trips to the continent while serving as Obama’s first ambassador to the UN. When South Sudan gained independence, in 2011, she hosted “a loud, super-sweaty dance party on the twenty-second floor of the new U.S. mission building where Americans, South Sudanese, African delegates and many others boogied long into the evening.” Before the Obama administration, no U.S. cabinet official had ever visited the tiny Central African Republic. In an effort to contain religious violence there, Power,

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who became UN ambassador when Rice took over the National Security Council (NSC), visited four times. Try to imagine that happening under President Donald Trump.

But while it's poignant that less than a decade ago top U.S. officials cared enough about South Sudan to dance the night away celebrating its independence, American goodwill didn't keep the newborn country from collapsing into civil war. Rice doesn't hide her disappointment. In fact, disappointment is a theme of the memoirs by Rice and *Power*, as well as of the one published in 2018 by Obama's top foreign policy speechwriter, Ben Rhodes. The three books intimately evoke the personal journeys of Obama's former advisers and their frustration in encountering what Rhodes, in his title, calls "the world as it is." In so doing, the memoirs end up chronicling both the decline of American power and the decline of American exceptionalism: the belief that the United States is immune to the tribalism and authoritarianism that plague other parts of the world.

YES WE CAN?

In different ways, each book traces a narrative arc that begins with a vow, made in young adulthood, to use the United States' might for good and ends with a sober realization about how hard fulfilling that vow actually is. For Rice, the arc begins with her failure, as a young NSC aide, to rouse the Clinton administration to halt the 1994 Rwandan genocide, after which she pledged "to go down fighting, if ever I saw another instance where I believed U.S. military intervention could . . . make a critical difference in saving large numbers of

human lives." For *Power*, it starts during her time as a war correspondent in Bosnia, where the besieged residents of Sarajevo asked her to "tell Clinton" about the horrors she had seen. For Rhodes, it begins with 9/11 and the Iraq war, which left him yearning to harness the idealism he felt the Bush administration had squandered.

In each book, three moments during the Obama administration play outsized roles in chastening this youthful idealism: the decision to bomb Libya in 2011, the decision not to bomb Syria in 2013, and the 2016 election.

As Rice notes, the Arab Spring opened a generational divide within the Obama foreign policy team. When an uprising began in Libya, and Muammar al-Qaddafi's forces closed in on the city of Benghazi to crush it, the administration's Gen-Xers, who had come of age during the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, pushed for military action. In a meeting in the Situation Room, *Power* handed Rhodes a note warning that, as he paraphrases it, Libya would be "the first mass atrocity that took place on our watch." Rice, then UN ambassador, recalls telling Obama that he "should not allow what could be perceived as his Rwanda to occur." A phalanx of older policymakers—Vice President Joe Biden, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon, and White House Chief of Staff William Daley—warned against entering another Middle Eastern war. But aided by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the young idealists won. The United States and its allies saved Benghazi and helped topple Qaddafi. *The New York Times* reported that Libyan parents—who had

seen Rice vote at the UN to authorize military action—were naming their children after her.

Then, as in South Sudan, things fell apart. As Rice admits, post-Qaddafi Libya became “a state without an effective government, and an exporter of refugees.” Rival militias have now carved up the country, and the chaos has proved fertile ground for the Islamic State, or ISIS. Given the effort that Rice, Power, and Rhodes devoted to ensuring that the United States intervened in Libya—and the importance each accorded to humanitarian intervention in general—their explanations for postwar Libya’s woes are frustratingly skimpy and vague. Rhodes discusses the 2012 attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi that ensnared him and Rice in a Fox News–fueled pseudo-scandal, but he says virtually nothing about what happened to postwar Libya itself. Rice acknowledges that the administration “failed to try hard enough and early enough to win the peace.” Power suggests that it “could have exerted more aggressive, high-level pressure on Libya’s neighbors to back a unified political structure” after Qaddafi’s fall.

But why didn’t it? Rice offers a clue when she writes, “in Washington, lingering ambivalence among some Principals about the original operation led the NSC to convene few Principals Committee meetings at a time when our efforts might have had a maximum impact” in stabilizing post-Qaddafi Libya. Since the national security adviser convenes such meetings, that sounds like a dig at Rice’s predecessor in the job, Donilon. It can also be read as a veiled jab at Obama himself, who showed little

appetite for a protracted commitment once Qaddafi was gone.

There’s a reason Rice isn’t more forthright. In her prologue, she announces, “Tell-all books, which sell copies at the expense of others, are tacky and not my style.” Power and Rhodes are equally polite. Unfortunately, their good manners come at the reader’s expense.

The problem isn’t that Rice, Power, and Rhodes shade the truth to make themselves look good. To the contrary, all three are, at various points, admirably frank about their mistakes. The problem is that by refusing to reveal what happened behind closed doors, they fail to help readers understand what lessons to draw from the Libya debacle. Is the lesson that presidents who lack the stomach for nation building shouldn’t topple regimes? Is it that the United States needs greater diplomatic capacity? Is it that brutal dictatorships are better than failed states? By not explaining Libya’s lessons, liberal internationalists like Rice, Power, and Rhodes make it easier for nativist bigots like Trump to proffer a lesson of their own: that Washington should care less about people overseas, especially if they are not Christian or white.

The second event that dampens the idealism of all three authors is Syria, a catastrophe over which, Rice writes, “my heart and my conscience will forever ache.” Rhodes supported Obama’s decision to pull back from the military strikes he had authorized in response to Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons attack in 2013. Rice and Power opposed it, the former more forcefully. But the more significant divergence came not over how the United States should respond to one chemical attack



but over how it should respond to Syria's ghastly civil war itself. Power urged "a no-fly zone over select areas of Syria that were under opposition control," even though that would have required destroying Syria's air defenses, which, according to the Pentagon, were five times as strong as Libya's. Rice, by contrast, suggests that the mistake lay not in doing too little but in promising too much. Perhaps, she proposes, the Obama administration should "have avoided declaratory statements such as 'Assad must go' or red lines as on chemical weapons that raised expectations for actions that may not have served U.S. interests." Rhodes wearily concurs. He calls Syria "a place where our inaction was a tragedy, and our intervention would only compound the tragedy."

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN CRONIN

In these brief statements, one can glimpse the embryo of a debate about state sovereignty, U.S. interests, and human rights. To protect Syrians from their murderous regime, Power proposed effectively dismembering the Syrian state. The obvious question is whether the American people—who didn't even support missile strikes in retaliation for Assad's use of chemical weapons—would have backed a U.S. commitment to, essentially, defend a chunk of Syrian territory against the Syrian government. Rice, by contrast, seems to have reluctantly moved toward the view that if brutal leaders like Qaddafi and Assad threaten their own citizens but not the United States, then it is better to let them quash dissent than to launch an intervention that Washington can't sustain and that may produce a failed state. At times, it appears that Obama agreed. "Maybe we never would have done Rwanda," he tells Rhodes at one point.

This shadow debate is important. Among the lessons young liberals such as Rice, Power, and Rhodes took from Bosnia and Rwanda is that defending human rights can require infringing on state sovereignty. Among the lessons of Libya and Syria is that state collapse can be as brutal as state repression. These disasters have helped Trump jettison the notion that the United States has any real responsibility for human rights beyond its borders, and they have helped him outline an international vision in which sovereignty is king.

What Democrats think about sovereignty is less clear. Rice and Rhodes appear more willing than Power to declare the end of the era of humanitarian military intervention. But the debate is not just about military force. In an age of declining U.S. power, is it morally necessary or strategically productive for the United States to challenge other countries' sovereignty—in such places as Hong Kong, Xianjing, and Kashmir—in the name of human rights? The next Democratic president will face a version of that question but won't find much guidance in these three books.

In each, the saga of disillusionment reaches its nadir in 2016, with Russia's electoral interference and Trump's election. After witnessing the limits of the United States' ability to defend democracy and human rights abroad, Rice, Power, and Rhodes realize to their horror the limits of its ability to defend those principles at home. When Obama asks Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate majority leader, to issue a joint statement condemning Russian interference in the election, McConnell refuses, a move that Rhodes calls "staggeringly partisan and unpatriotic." Near the end of her book, Power acknowledges, "While I once viewed the conflict in Bosnia as a last gasp of ethnic chauvinism and demagoguery from a bygone era, it now seems more of a harbinger of the way today's autocrats and opportunists exploit grievances . . . in order to expand their own power." Rice, in the final pages of her book, veers from foreign policy to a call for unity, civility, and decency at home.

Although none of the authors puts it this way, it's possible to read their books not only as tales of tempered idealism but

also as chronicles of America's declining exceptionalism. In retrospect, the belief in democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention that Rice, Power, and Rhodes embraced early in their careers rested on a faith that democracy was stable at home. With that faith now eroded—and the United States battling its own rising tribalism, authoritarianism, and brutality—it is hard to imagine a book like Power's *A Problem From Hell*, a critique of the country's repeated failure to stop genocide, becoming the sensation it did in 2002. As Americans have grown more preoccupied with, and more pessimistic about, their own country's moral condition, they have turned inward. As a young woman, Power helped expose concentration camps in Bosnia. Today's young activists are exposing them in Texas. As of September, foreign policy has barely figured in the Democratic presidential debates.

Rice, Power, and Rhodes also end up chronicling the United States' declining power. In Libya in 2011, Russia stood aside and let Washington and its NATO allies wage war unimpeded, a continuation of a unipolar pattern established in the 1990s by U.S.-led interventions in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans. By 2015, Russia was not only thwarting the U.S. effort at regime change in Syria in the UN Security Council; it was sending its troops to do so on the battlefield. By 2016, Russia had brought its counter-offensive to American soil. Apparently convinced that Washington was trying to foment political revolution in Russia, President Vladimir Putin helped foment a political revolution inside the United States.

Even more striking than what Rice, Power, and Rhodes say about Russia is what they don't say about China. That Beijing figures so little in all three books is the clearest indication that they chronicle a different time. In retrospect, the entire post-Cold War era that framed the careers of Rice, Power, and Rhodes—an era in which U.S. foreign policy focused on counterterrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, democracy promotion, economic liberalization, and humanitarian intervention—may turn out to have been merely a parenthesis between superpower competitions.

PORTRAITS AND MEMORIES

Rhodes offers the most intimate portrait of Obama. He describes the former president as conscientious, decent, and intellectually curious but not exactly warm—a man easier to admire than to feel close to. At times, Obama's almost inhuman discipline and self-control make him intolerant of the limitations of others. After Rhodes loses his razor on a 2011 trip to Latin America, Obama scolds him for not shaving. Rhodes fumes that the president "seemed oblivious to the work I was doing out of his sight, work that left me no time to buy a razor. But as I calmed down, I realized that . . . being composed and professional—*doing the job*—was how he managed to take everything in stride. I hadn't just failed to shave. I'd deviated from his ethos of unflappability." In another scene, Rhodes reflects that Obama's tendency to eat the same meal again and again (salmon, brown rice, and broccoli) "said something about his discipline—food was something that sustained his health and energy in this job, not something

to be enjoyed.” Rhodes, by contrast, douses his anxiety with late-night drinking and TV binge watching.

Unlike Rhodes, neither Rice nor Power discusses the Obama administration in detail until the second half of her book. In both cases, it’s a shrewd decision. Because both women are loath to offend former colleagues, they can’t offer an unvarnished portrait of the personalities and struggles behind Obama’s foreign policy. Each compensates for this literary problem in the same way: by offering a strikingly unvarnished portrait of her own life.

Power’s talent as a writer comes through most eloquently in the book’s opening chapters, when she describes her relationship with her magnetic, alcoholic father. “Guinness,” she writes, “the dark brown, silky stout with the thick, pillowy head—was not just his drink; it was his craft.” She recounts the long afternoons she spent as a child reading, singing, and basking in her father’s love in Hartigan’s, a Dublin bar that “had a smell that mingled urine, chlorine disinfectant, and the swirl of barley, malt, and hops.” When Power’s mother, fearful that Ireland’s sexist legal system would not allow her to divorce, snuck out of the country with Samantha and her brother in tow, her father began a slow suicide that ended with the discovery of her “dad’s decomposing body amid the stench of vomit and human waste.” Thirty years later, when Power—now a famous author and Obama adviser—returns to Hartigan’s, she asks a longtime bartender why her father let alcohol take his life. The bartender’s answer: “Because you left.”

Rice lacks Power’s literary gifts. At times, her prose reads like the transcript

of a Sunday show. But she, too, writes affectingly about a childhood that combined deep love and deep trauma. The similarities between Rice’s and Power’s upbringings are striking. Each woman’s mother battled to build a career in a punishingly sexist milieu. Each woman’s brilliant but controlling father objected, which spawned affairs, which spawned an ugly divorce, which each girl witnessed up close. As her parents’ fighting grew more violent, Rice remembers worrying that her mother would kill herself. Power writes about getting on her knees and saying Hail Marys and Our Fathers while her parents hurled dishes at each other in the kitchen.

Terrified and precocious, each girl tried to save her parents’ marriage. “Starting at seven years old,” Rice writes, “I appointed myself chief firefighter, mediator, and judge, working to defuse arguments, broker compromises, and bring rationality to bear when emotion overwhelmed reason.” Power remembers brandishing a 50-pence piece she had been saving and telling her parents, “Whichever of you doesn’t argue with the other will get this.” She added, “I will be watching.” It’s easy to see the foreshadowing. If Rice and Power endured bitter disappointment when their best efforts couldn’t prevent Libya, Syria, or South Sudan from disintegrating, they were at least well prepared.

WHAT’S LEFT UNSAID

At times, it’s frustrating that Rice and Power aren’t as self-reflective about American foreign policy as they are about themselves. When describing how Afghan President Hamid Karzai accused U.S. soldiers of abusing Afghan civilians, Rice calls it a “typical but

never tolerable rant” without presenting any evidence that Karzai was wrong. She boasts about having “spearheaded efforts to prevent Palestine from being admitted prematurely to the UN as a full member state (a status it sought in order to bypass negotiations for a two-state solution)” and about having vetoed a 2011 resolution declaring Israeli settlements illegal because it was “an unhelpful diversion that could set back efforts to press the two parties to negotiate directly.”

This is wildly unconvincing. Given Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s blatant hostility to the creation of a viable Palestinian state, the Palestinians—having lived without basic rights for a half century—had every right to appeal to the UN. It’s depressing that, even now, Rice won’t grapple with the moral perversity of the policy she carried out. Power, for her part, avoids Israel almost entirely, even though her abstention on a later settlement resolution, in the Obama administration’s waning days, was among the most controversial actions of her UN tenure. Israel doesn’t even have its own heading in her book’s index. Rhodes comes closest to acknowledging that in making policy toward Israel, political expediency often trumped conviction. “Netanyahu,” he writes, “had mastered a certain kind of leverage: using political pressure within the United States to demoralize any meaningful push for peace.” But even Rhodes never gives himself the intellectual and moral license to imagine a U.S. policy unfettered by political limitations.

It’s easy to understand these choices. Since questioning the United States’ virtually unconditional support for

Israel can imperil a policymaker’s hope of ever serving in government again, it is not surprising that Rice, Power, and, to a lesser degree, Rhodes play it safe in their books. But in so doing, they fail to acknowledge the uncomfortable ways in which Trump’s disregard for human rights represents a continuation of—rather than a break from—the policies of the government in which they served. The price of entry for continued public service is discretion. The price of entry for serious policy discussion is honesty. Both are legitimate choices. But there’s a tension between the two. Rice, Power, and Rhodes chose discretion, which undermines the quality of their analysis.

Perhaps it is fitting that in memoirs that describe the many constraints under which the Obama administration labored, Rice, Power, and Rhodes manifest those constraints themselves by failing to challenge one of the most politically treacherous, and least morally defensible, aspects of American foreign policy. This too, evidently, is part of what Power, in her book’s title, calls “the education of an idealist.” One can only hope that in the future, it’s an education that able and decent policymakers like them will feel comfortable doing without. 🌐