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Book Reviews

America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft. New York, Basic Books, 2008. 304 pp. \$27.50.

Between 20 February and 2 April 2008, former national security advisers Brent Scowcroft (who served under Republican President George H.W. Bush) and Zbigniew Brzezinski (who served under Democratic President Jimmy Carter) met eight times, with David Ignatius as moderator, to discuss current and probable future challenges for American foreign policy. These “Conversations” between two of our most-respected senior analysts of world affairs, as guided by a leading foreign policy correspondent, are striking for the similarity of viewpoints the two men express and for the range of issues they discuss. Although some of the matters they debate already seem dated, and others that are now current were not anticipated in the late winter and early spring of 2008, the mood of reflective realism that permeates the discussion should make reading the book a worthwhile undertaking for years to come.

To be sure, much of these Conversations sounds more like a pastiche of clichés than hard-headed analysis of what the United States should be doing in world affairs. The much-discussed “global awakening” that both Scowcroft and Brzezinski see as demands for “dignity” did not begin just yesterday, as they imply, and can as often lead to orgies of death and destruction as to the spread of human rights and democratic government. So too, the observation that power on the world scene is shifting from the North Atlantic to the North Pacific, or that problems are posed for the global commons by climate change or non-state actors, be they terrorists or global economic actors, seem more like lectures to be given in an introductory course on international relations than penetrating observations on trends in global history. Similarly, the repeated observation by both men that the United States should be idealistic and liberal abroad when it can, but realistic, and, by implication, deadly, when it must, sounds more like a nostrum than a policy. Or again, the notion that Washington should look to cooperate with, and not dominate, other actors on the international stage, so as to be part of the forces of change and not a reactionary or even status quo power, sounds like a platitude until we know how it will be translated into policy on the world stage.

The interesting parts of these Conversations arise, then, not so much from the general observations that Scowcroft and Brzezinski advance as from their

application to policy issues confronting us today and tomorrow. Their comments on the Soviet Union/Russia in the first and fifth chapters are surely the high points of the book. Each man offers personal reminiscences on the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union that are informed by a sense of history and political involvement. The dramatic events of 1989–1991 thus finally put an end to the developments in world history unleashed by World War I, and both men speculate on the might-have-beens had American policy been other than it was during the 1990s when Russia fared so badly. And both advance arguments on how Russia should be treated today.

On other matters, Scowcroft and Brzezinski are also often interesting. Both are harsh on what Brzezinski calls “a posture of self-indulgence and then of extreme arrogance on the part of the United States” in the 1990s, when we assumed “we could sit back and enjoy this new imperial status that was bestowed on us on December 25, 1991” (p. 15). Both point out more than once that the American failure to achieve a settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a more general failure to work with forces in the Middle East (and the greater Muslim world beyond), and a key shortcoming of both Democratic and Republican administrations. Both would engage Iran directly, without preconditions, so as to deal with the unwelcome development of nuclear weapons there. Both appeal for a prudent approach to avoid anti-Americanism in Pakistan and doubt the wisdom of American support for the nuclear development of India. Both men argue for American backing for an increasingly expanded, unified, and powerful European Union. Each would downplay American efforts to push democratization abroad and be prepared to work with authoritarian states where we have common interests at stake. And both deal in similar terms with issues of the structure of the American national security bureaucracy, and on the importance of effective leadership.

Differences between Brzezinski and Scowcroft do exist. The former would have the United States withdraw from Iraq more quickly than would the latter, although the point of agreement is that an exit strategy is vital. Or again, Brzezinski would push NATO up against the Russian border so as to extinguish the imperial pretensions he feels are still widespread in Russia by a strong dose of realism as to where real power lies. Scowcroft, by contrast, suggests that the expansion of the European Union into Ukraine would be a more effective check on Russian revanchism and warns against inciting a Russian sense of wounded pride. But each looks forward to eventual cooperative relations with Moscow.

Such differences as there are appear greater between the moderator, David Ignatius, on the one hand, and Scowcroft and Brzezinski, on the other. Ignatius is more concerned about dangers posed by Iran, inclined to follow Israel’s lead in dealing with the Arabs, and sees China as more of a rising threat than do the former national security advisers, who believe that China’s transition to great-power status may be handled responsibly. To the extent that Ignatius may be considered a third interlocutor in this book, his observations

serve as a foil enhancing the far better arguments of the two former national security advisers.

Where the Conversations grow weaker, in my opinion, has to do with economic globalization. Both men seem to find this force as anonymous as the spread of industrialization was a century ago (when I would argue that the United States has spearheaded this development), both see the process as weakening the state as an actor in local and world events (so disregarding the growing power of Beijing and the urgent need for state leadership in a reform process that is often referred to today as a “Bretton Woods II”), and, although recognizing the strains induced by globalization, both men laud the movement as both inevitable and, on balance, positive. While some concern is expressed for stable energy supplies and climate control, there is nothing especially insightful about their comments and much that they did not anticipate during their month of discussion that would occur later.

To put it more strongly, the ignorance of these two men on the impact of globalization on world and domestic politics is palpable. To be sure, Brzezinski deplores the absence of an effective train service in the Northeast corridor and warns that our increasing national indebtedness cannot be sustained, while Scowcroft opines on the character of sovereign wealth funds. But what neither confronts is the decline of the American middle class, the monopolization of the benefits of globalization by the top 10 percent of society, the erosion of American manufacturing, and the rise of Chinese power as a result. All of these developments and more were plainly visible at the time of these Conversations, before the financial meltdown struck hard beginning months later in 2008. By concentrating on diplomatic, military, and political matters to the relative neglect of those that are economic, Scowcroft and Brzezinski appear narrow and naïve with respect to this important dimension of international power.

In part because of their faith in economic globalization, both Scowcroft and Brzezinski attack the notion of the United States as a declining power and assert instead the necessary leadership role of Washington in world affairs. In particular, the hosannas sung toward the end of the seventh chapter to the wonders of what it means to be America are breath-taking in their arrogant patriotism (a shortcoming we were earlier instructed to avoid).

The discussion of what kind of thinking got us into Iraq is also to be noted for its vagueness, not its incisiveness. Brzezinski repeatedly tells us about the importance of learning lessons from history, but why the lack of more-explicit discussion here? Just as we apparently did not learn “the lessons of Vietnam” (a subject neither man addresses), so it is unclear what are to be the lessons from Iraq. Nor were contentious decisions these national security advisers made while in office explored: for example, Brzezinski with his ill-considered call to back the Shah as he was falling with American military involvement in Iran; Scowcroft by his failure to act to support the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs against Saddam Hussein’s murderous attacks in the aftermath of the Gulf War.

Here is a book to be recommended, then, for the lessons to be learned from the shortcomings of its participants as well as from their valuable insights, a primer on how important government officials of a certain age and background have reflected on world affairs. Although events are sure soon to date much of the specific policy recommendations advanced here, the style of analysis represented by these two leading statesmen deserves careful attention.

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Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam
by Gordon M. Goldstein. New York, Times Books, 2008. 320 pp. \$25.00.

I started this book with three skeptical questions. Would it contribute anything new to the Vietnam War literature? Would it be compromised by the author's relationship with his subject? Would it live up to its title of drawing "lessons" for the present and future? I was pleased with the answers to all three.

While others have focused on McGeorge Bundy (Kai Bird, for example), Gordon M. Goldstein does so with primary source material to which he had unique access. Goldstein started the project as a research assistant for Bundy's own memoir, intended to finally address Vietnam after decades of his limited willingness to do so. Bundy died in the midst of this project, but not before extensive interviews and substantial drafting (what Goldstein calls "Bundy fragments" in citing them). These bear especially on two key points.

One is Bundy's own greater willingness to finally acknowledge failure and his role in it. For years, he stuck to the position that the war "was necessary and right" (p. 19), acknowledging little more than some tactical mistakes. When Robert McNamara published his memoir, *In Retrospect* (1995), with its strong critique that "we were wrong, terribly wrong," Bundy did shift a bit to saying "it's very unlikely we were right looking at the evidence as we now have it" (p. 22). But in the Bundy fragments Goldstein draws on, we get much more: "I had a part in a great failure. I made mistakes of perception, execution and recommendation ... the war was, overall, a war we should not have fought" (pp. 24–25).

This book also contributes to the "what would JFK have done had he lived" debate? Goldstein has Bundy coming down on the side of those such as McNamara and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., that John F. Kennedy would not have escalated the commitment to ground troops and likely would have withdrawn. Bundy had "mused" on this in a 1964 oral history interview with Richard Neustadt (p. 230). Goldstein goes further, that "in his final years ... Bundy arrived at a firm judgment ... that President Kennedy would not have deployed ground combat forces to Vietnam and thus would not have Americanized the war" (p. 231). This is not conclusive; it cannot be as a matter of empirics. But Goldstein does a good job of not just asserting his