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Samantha Power. *The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir.* New York: Harper Collins, 2019. Illustrations. xii + 580 pp. $29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-282069-3.

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Untitled [Peter Rutland on The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir]

The election of Barack Hussein Obama in 2008 was an extraordinary moment in American history. Not only was he America's first black president, but he was also an intellectual, a person who took ideas very seriously and promised to put American politics at home and abroad on a new moral foundation. He won reelection in 2012 and had some signature achievements along the way: handling the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and getting the Affordable Care Act passed. But he failed to deal with inequality or immigration, and his foreign policy was marred by the civil wars in Libya and Syria. Above all, his presidency is overshadowed by the fact that he was succeeded by Donald J. Trump.

Now we are seeing a steady stream of memoirs from former members of the Obama administration. They include works by National Security Adviser Susan Rice (*Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* [2019]) and speechwriter Ben Rhodes (*The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* [2018]), down to more personal accounts, even one from a White House stenographer, Beth Dorey Stein (*From the Corner of the Oval: A Memoir* [2018]). (Not to forget Michelle Obama's best seller, *Becoming: A Memoir* [2018].)

A new addition to the oeuvre is Samantha Power's *The Education of An Idealist*. Power came to the United States from Ireland in 1979 at the age of nine. A keen basketball player, sports seem to have dominated her life through high school and college. While interning as a sports journalist, she saw footage of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, and that stimulated her interest in human rights. After graduating from Yale University, she went to work as a freelance journalist in the Balkans, returning to complete a law degree at Harvard and become the founding director of the Carr Center for Human Rights at the Kennedy School. Enraged by the genocide in Bosnia (1992-95), she wrote *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (2002).

Impressed by the book, Obama met Power in 2005, when he was a senator from Illinois. Power volunteered to serve in his office for a year, and Obama subsequently hired her as a foreign policy adviser when he ran for the presidency in 2008. In March 2008, she had to resign from the campaign after describing rival candidate Hillary Clinton as a "monster" in an interview in Ireland (while suffering from jet lag). She returned to work on the campaign after five months in the "penalty box" (p. 189). After the election, she was appointed spe-

cial assistant and senior director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights in the National Security Council (2009-13) and then as ambassador to the United Nations (2013-17). Though she apologized to Clinton, her chilly relationship with the secretary of state must have limited Power's influence in the White House.

Power's impressive career trajectory is testimony to her intelligence and determination. Her experience as a woman and mother of young children holding down senior positions in the national security establishment is also salutary. The book is exceptionally well written (as were her previous books) and is candid in discussing the personal barriers that she overcame along the way, most notably the trauma of losing her alcoholic father to divorce and then his death when she was fourteen. This trauma manifested itself in breathing attacks, back pain, and visits to her therapist for years into adulthood. Though one is wary of reductionist psychological explanations of political actions, in this case it seems relevant to consider the relationship between the wrenching loss of her father and her subsequent quest to put the world to rights—and to find heroic (male) individuals to carry out that task.

Power's meteoric career trajectory did encounter some obstacles along the way. Her book manuscript on genocide was initially turned down by Random House, which had paid her an advance, and her agent was unable to place it with another publisher. At that point, Power phoned a friend, Marty Perez, the editor of *New Republic*, who agreed to publish the book, which went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 2003. This—and several other episodes—illustrates the importance of mentors in Power's ascent to the political Olympus. Another piece of career advice may be less appropriate for students wishing to emulate her success. She explains, with remarkable candor, how she landed her first journalism gig. She was working as an intern at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington, DC, and her boss advised her not to try to go to Bosnia as a freelance journalist. One evening, after the other staff had left, Power went into the office of *Foreign Policy* magazine and forged herself a recommendation letter, which she used to get UN accreditation as a journalist.

Apart from the arc of personal achievement, the other unifying thread (as signaled in the book's title) is the question of what happens when an idealist enters the political establishment. Predictably enough, Power found herself forced to compromise with pragmatically oriented politicians (anxious about public perceptions and electoral prospects) and bureaucrats (vested in turf battles and standard operating procedures). Inevitably, Power's crusading idealism was dashed on the rocks of caution and calculation of the national interest.

Once ensconced in her windowless office in the White House, Power was surprised by how little face time she was able to get with Obama. Access to the president was tightly regulated, and Power struggled to get a moment with the president. In formal meetings, Obama liked to go around the room and hear the opinions of all present, including the junior staff in the back row, and on those occasions Power would have a chance to make her pitch—but almost always found herself in a minority. She relates, for example, how in 2009 she was unable to persuade Obama to include a mention of the 1915 Armenian genocide during a visit to Turkey, despite the fact that he had promised to do so on the campaign trail. Obama declined on the grounds that the US was in the middle of trying to persuade the Turkish government to reconcile with Armenia. Similarly, she had to go to great lengths to get one line about LGBT rights into a 2011 Obama speech—the first time a leader had ever mentioned gay rights in the UN General Assembly. Rhodes, Obama's speechwriter and later deputy national security adviser, was the gatekeeper in most of these cases. He was close to her ideologically: another young idealist who joined Team Obama. But Power does not feature very

prominently in Rhodes's own 450-page memoir. He writes that "to my generation of liberals she offered an alternative to the neoconservative views that had dominated the debate after 9/11," and that "after a conversation with Samantha, I'd go home ... thinking that I was part of a movement that would remake the world order" (p. 20).[1]

Power seems to have been much more comfortable when she became UN ambassador: she had a lot more autonomy and was able to use her formidable interpersonal skills to build coalitions for change with the other UN representatives. She was even able to forge a personal friendship with Vitaly Churkin, the fiercely patriotic Russian ambassador. Despite the close personal relationship, Churkin ruthlessly defended the Russian position, vetoing a resolution condemning the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, for example.

Her most significant accomplishment, according to her telling, was her mobilization of the UN to tackle the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Tragically, a young boy was struck and killed by one of the cars in her motorcade during a 2016 visit to Cameroon. Power was devastated by the incident and insisted on meeting with the family. Her biggest disappointment was her inability to persuade Obama to take military action in Syria, in the face of resolute opposition to military intervention from Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates (a holdover from the George W. Bush administration). Even after Syrian president Bashar al-Assad crossed Obama's "red line" in 2013 and used nerve agents against the residents of a rebel Damascus suburb, Obama backed down.

The descent of Libya into civil war was another calamity. In that case, the US ***did*** intervene, with air strikes that stopped Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's forces from overrunning the rebels. But the end result was hardly any better than in Syria: Gaddafi was toppled (and executed) but the country fell into chaos, leading to a flood of refugees headed north to Europe and a surge of heavily armed Islamist militants headed south into Mali and Niger. Power defends the US intervention as the "best possible—or least bad—outcome," arguing that "we could hardly expect to have a crystal ball when it came to accurately predicting outcomes in places where the culture was not our own" (p. 306).

Power stops short of any radically critical thinking about the trajectory of Obama's foreign policy and the dilemmas of American power projection in the modern world. In conclusion, she retreats into vague generalities, citing favorite phrases about the importance of doing something while recognizing that progress is incremental ("shrink your change," "better is good," and don't just "admire the problem") (pp. 517, 350). The candor with which she discusses her personal life is not matched by candor in addressing the impact of the policies that Obama pursued. It is not clear whether this is because she has not come up with answers to these questions or just because she is hoping to return to public service. *New Yorker* author Dexter Filkins suggests that "much of the book reads as though it were written by someone campaigning for her next job—one that requires Senate confirmation."[2] Perhaps for that reason there is no discussion of such burning issues as the rise of China, the Arab-Israeli conflict, or global terrorism and Obama's reliance on drone strikes, all of which bear directly on human rights.[3]

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman admires Power, describing her as "a table-pounding idealist and human rights advocate, [who] believed in using American power to protect innocent civilians and advance democracy."[4] But Power has plenty of critics. From the Left, she is attacked for ignoring the fact that the United States typically deploys its power in defense of its national interests (and sometimes corporate interests) and not in pursuit of humanitarian goals. From the Right, she is criticized for just the opposite—for ignoring US national interests in pursuit of quixotic universal human rights. There are plenty of arguments she could use to defend herself—but does

not do so in this book. Nor does she try to situate herself in the competing academic schools of realists versus institutionalists, neocons versus isolationists, etc.

Despite the title (***The Education of an Idealist***), this memoir has almost no critical intellectual engagement. There is little discussion of specific books or thinkers that influenced her when she was growing up—or in later life, for that matter.[5] This is surprising, not least because in 2008 she married Cass Sunstein, a prodigiously prolific author and law professor. We learn a lot more about her favorite baseball team than her favorite books. Her Catholic upbringing must have influenced her thinking to some degree, but we do not hear about this either.

Power's worldview is laid out in her 2002 book on genocide prevention. She has a straightforward model: there is evil being done and good people have to step in to stop it. She coined the term "upstander," as opposed to "bystander," a concept out of Holocaust literature. The end of the Cold War created a window that often left the US as the key global enforcer.[6] Power praises the US for intervening in Bosnia in 1995 (after several years' delay) and Kosovo in 1999 and castigates it for doing nothing to prevent the Rwanda genocide in 1993. Though she generally sees the US as a force for good in the world, she opposed the 2003 Iraq war (as did Obama) and does not favor military intervention unless other means of influence have failed. ***A Problem from Hell*** was structured around the stories of heroic individuals who stood up for the truth in the face of human suffering, such as Raphael Lemkin who coined the term "genocide," Richard Holbrooke (assistant secretary of state), Peter Galbraith (the former US ambassador to Croatia), and Sergio Vieira de Mello. The latter, the UN special representative in Iraq, died in the 2003 bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad, and was the subject of a biography by Power (***Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World*** [2008]).

Power's somewhat black-and-white view of the world arguably fails to recognize the complexity of the conflicts within which genocides take place. It is often hard to distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys, and the prospect of US intervention can change the behavior of actors on the ground in unpredictable ways.[7] For example, in 1998 the Kosovo Liberation Army stepped up attacks on Serbian police, knowing that if they responded with brutal repression the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) might intervene. Even in Rwanda, the US was not an idle observer. Washington was active in pushing the moderate Hutu government to make peace with the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) (who had mounted an invasion from Uganda) and to form a power-sharing government with them.[8] That drove the radical Hutus to mount a coup and launch the genocide. It also helps explain the inaction of the French, who had five thousand troops in the country but did not intervene to stop the massacres (they saw the English-speaking Tutsi RPF as a proxy for expanding US influence in the region).

Power's book raises many important questions about the place of ideals in US foreign policy, of how to balance human rights with US national interests. That debate has become somewhat irrelevant under the Trump administration, but it will doubtless return to center stage under the next president.

Notes

[1]. Ben Rhodes, ***The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*** (New York: Random House, 2018), 18, 20.

[2]. Dexter Filkins, "The Moral Logic of Humanitarian Intervention," ***The New Yorker***, September 19, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/16/the-moral-logic-of-humanitarian-intervention.

[3]. There is no entry for drones in Power's index. Yet "the 542 drone strikes that Obama authorized killed an estimated 3,797 people, including

324 civilians." Micah Zenko, "Obama's Final Drone Strike Data," Council on Foreign Relations, January 20, 2017, https://www.cfr.org/blog/obamas-final-drone-strike-data.

[4]. Thomas Friedman, "What Samantha Power Learned on the Job," review of *The Education of an Idealist*, by Samantha Power, *New York Times*, September 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/10/books/review/the-education-of-an-idealist-samantha-power.html.

[5]. She briefly mentions Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History" and Albert Hirschman's *Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (1991) (pp. 44, 226).

[6]. Stephen M. Walt, Robert Jervis, Michael C. Desch, Paul K. MacDonald, Sergey Radchenko, and Kori Schake, roundtable on *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, by Stephen M. Walt, H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable 10, no. 31, H-Net, July 16, 2019, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/4294548/h-diploissf-roundtable-10-31-hell-good-intentions-america%E2%80%99s.

[7]. David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun, Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2005); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrah, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

[8]. William Ferroggiaro, "The US and the Genocide in Rwanda 1994," National Security Archive, March 24, 2004, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB117/.

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