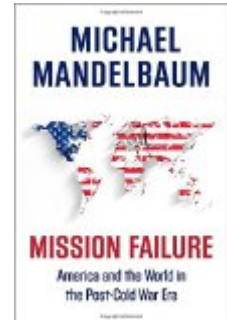




**Michael Mandelbaum.** *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 504 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-046947-4.



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When reading Michael Mandelbaum's *Mission Failure*, it is hard not to think of one of the great fictional Hollywood philosophers, Ian Malcolm, the comedic chaos theory mathematician of *Jurassic Park* (1993) played by Jeff Goldblum. During a dinner debate over the moral dilemma of bringing dinosaurs back from extinction, Malcolm says, "your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, that they didn't stop to think if they should."

Mandelbaum, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and a leading realist theoretician, offers a sweeping narrative of American foreign policy under the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama administrations. The detail provided by Mandelbaum is extremely insightful and should be necessary reading for anyone wanting to understand the nuance of many important world events of the past twenty-five years. Today's students of international politics, who grew up during this time period, would certainly benefit from the historical case studies outlined by Man-

delbaum. At times, however, the main message of the book gets lost in the descriptive details.

Mandelbaum's primary thesis revolves around the change of goals that American foreign policy experienced with the end of the Cold War. Where some would say that Clinton, Bush, and Obama pursued dramatically different foreign policy agendas, Mandelbaum argues that they all ended up in the same place: "trying to transform domestic political and economic practices in selected places around the world" (p. 7). The reasoning for this, according to Mandelbaum, is that the "eclipse of power politics after the end of the Cold War had given the world's strongest and wealthiest country the opportunity to concentrate on missions of transformation in places not previously important enough to attract American attention" (p. 366). In essence, the United States was able to leave the realm of necessity and enter the world of choice without really having to consider if it should. As a result, not only did all three post-Cold War presidencies follow the same path in their interventions in such places as Somalia, Haiti, the

Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, but they also led to the same result: failure.

Mandelbaum's argument is not new; he wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* twenty years ago critiquing the Clinton administration's foreign policy as "social work."<sup>[1]</sup> However, his book attempts to capture the failures of all three post-Cold War presidents under the same conceptual umbrella, meanwhile also attempting to provide some explanation for why they failed. For Mandelbaum, trying to transform the domestic political structure of other countries, both nation building and state building, was mission impossible. "America failed at both endeavors for the simple reason that neither was within its power to accomplish" (p. 11). As the most powerful country in the world, the United States had no problem succeeding in its military missions, but it did not have the capacity to achieve its more idealistic political missions. In a sense, America was so successful at keeping the global peace, which it easily could do, that it never stopped to think if the next step, re-making countries in its image, is something it should do.

Mandelbaum's conclusion that the United States should not try to influence the internal politics of other countries because change cannot simply be made to happen is widely accepted among today's foreign policy community. However, Mandelbaum's attempt to judge all three post-Cold War presidents under the same, broad criteria sometimes feels like a stretch. Mistakes were certainly made by Clinton, Bush, and Obama, but their goals and efforts at transforming other countries were vastly different. It is hard to compare Bush's attempts in Iraq and Obama's in Afghanistan with those of Clinton's in Somalia or the Balkans. Bush and Obama invested hundreds of thousands of American troops, trillions of dollars, and years of diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. Meanwhile, as Mandelbaum notes, Clinton "showed no sign of caring what came next in each place" and "did not try very hard" to turn Somalia,

Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo into better places (p. 131). But the same cannot be said for the Bush and Obama administrations. *Mission Failure* would have benefited from a deeper case analysis of the different goals and efforts of these administrations.

Besides the impossible nature of the missions themselves, Mandelbaum believes, another reason for America's post-Cold War failures lies within those countries that the United States was attempting to transform—particularly their culture. According to Mandelbaum, "In all human endeavors culture matters," and the cultures the United States was confronted with offered difficult conditions or a weak basis for building and sustaining a modern state (p. 169). The Western institutions that the United States hoped to install failed; they "required patterns of behavior alien or unacceptable to the people," but the societies in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq "were dominated by social and political loyalties too narrow" to support the development of a modern state (p. 371). For Mandelbaum, the failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also had its roots in the political culture of the Arab people as well as Islam's incompatibility with democracy. In later chapters, he also mentions the political traditions in Russia and China as factors worth considering in how America approaches these major powers.

Such arguments about political culture are hard to disprove and at the same time are unsatisfying. Culture is hard to define, and while Mandelbaum might be correct to a certain degree, his analysis is overly pessimistic and a bit unfair at times. Who is to say that political culture cannot change over time, if only incrementally (see the Arab Spring)? And yes, the Palestinians see themselves as victims and that is a part of their political outlook, but it is the same for Israelis and their view of the peace process. Moreover, Arab countries have made peace with Israel, and Islamic states have found the path to democracy, even

though it might prove longer and harder than other democratizing countries. It is difficult to dismiss culture completely from the equation, but whose culture should we be focusing on? Is it in America's political culture to pick the "wrong type" of countries that we want to transform? Or is ignorance—that America can do whatever we want wherever we want—the real explanation for its post-Cold War failures?

Ultimately, these types of debates over why America failed are no longer consequential for Mandelbaum as he believes that the freedom the United States enjoyed during the post-Cold War period is now over. According to Mandelbaum, 2014 was a turning point for American foreign policy as the world changed and returned to much of the old ways of the Cold War. This restoration of global power politics is a byproduct of two concurring developments. First, the West found itself increasingly vulnerable as well as less influential in world politics after the global economic crisis in 2008. Second, as America's "bubble burst," such major powers as Russia and China began to reassert themselves on the global stage and rogue states emerged as "potential disruptors of the international peace" through their pursuit of nuclear weapons (p. 325). In effect, the return of power politics made the previous two decades' missions of transformation into luxuries that America could no longer afford. The United States needed to revert back to the foreign policy it should be focusing on, not adventures it could be doing. The time for social work is over.

There is no question that the United States found itself weakened after the economic crisis and that the Obama administration turned inward to a certain degree. While this might have opened the door for China and Russia, Mandelbaum's interpretation again seems overly pessimistic and somewhat alarmist. The debates over the return of geopolitics and the true nature of the rise of China have dominated international relations scholarship for some time now.[2] Yet the

realist perspective of *Mission Failure* does not take into account that Russia's move in Ukraine could be one of weakness not strength or that China's claims in the South China Sea might not be part of a bigger plan for mastery in Asia and beyond. As Joseph Nye argues in *Is the American Century Over?* (2015), the actions of China and Russia over the last two years do not necessarily mean that Pax Americana is at an end.

While Mandelbaum finished the book before Obama completed the nuclear deal with Iran, he is critical of such efforts and goes on to say that the use of force is "the only certain way to prevent nuclear proliferation" (p. 332). Here Mandelbaum only cites analysts who are overly optimistic about attacking Iran without considering the wealth of scholarship that is skeptical about air strikes solving the problem.[3] Furthermore, as the history of proliferation suggests, there are numerous states, Ukraine and South Africa, to name a couple, that have voluntarily given up their nuclear weapons programs without the United States or international community using force.[4] Mandelbaum's discussion of North Korea exemplifies his approach throughout much of the book. He explains what has happened in the past without offering up much of his own solutions, besides his idea that transforming internal politics is not what the United States should be doing.

In the end, Mandelbaum's history of American foreign policy over the post-Cold War period is an important contribution to the literature, and what is absent most is not more discussion about the realist "should" versus the idealist "could." Instead, to return to a previous point, Mandelbaum fails to provide thorough analysis and prediction to go along with his rich description of events. While the three most recent presidents all failed in some of their efforts, there is something else going on that *Mission Failure* misses—a process of learning occurring among the post-Cold War commander in chiefs.

Clinton made a number of foreign policy mistakes, as Mandelbaum and many others have noted, but Bush came into office pledging to not make the same errors. Although Bush did fail in Iraq, he did not attempt nearly as many transformation missions as Clinton did. More important, Obama, a self-proclaimed realist, saw what happened to his predecessor and, again, tried to set American foreign policy on less of an interventionist path. And even though Obama failed in places such as Libya, he has largely resisted inserting the United States back into missions of transformation, whether in Syria or places of other Arab Spring uprisings. Therefore, one could argue that American foreign policy is trending in the right direction in terms of efforts to change the internal politics of other countries. Presidents seem more likely now to stop and think if they should rather than if they could. In essence, *Mission Failure* is more preoccupied with giving out failing grades than with determining if its subjects learned anything in the process.

Another point worth considering is if the United States can really afford to ignore what occurs inside other countries and stick to policing the international order as Mandelbaum suggests. International problems, such as climate change, terrorism, and failed states, all originate within countries' borders and still pose a significant threat even if great power politics have returned. Furthermore, these types of challenges will require the United States and the broader international community to continue efforts at state building. One can only hope that policymakers read books like Mandelbaum's and learn from the mistakes of the past to turn our best intentions into successful practices. However, much like watching *Jurassic Park*, there will still be times in the future when we will have to close our eyes and try to avoid the scary parts of American foreign policy.

Notes

[1]. Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 1 (1996): 16-32.

[2]. For examples on the debate about the return of power politics see Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 69-79; and John G. Ikenberry, "The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 80-90. For overviews on the debate over a rising China, see Derek Scissors and Arvind Subramanian, "The Great China Debate: Will Beijing Rule the World?" *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (2012): 173-177; and John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 381-396.

[3]. For example, see Colin H. Kahl, "Not Time to Attack Iran: Why War Should Be a Last Resort," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2012): 166-173.

[4]. For an overview, see Scott Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 54-86; and Harald Müller and Andreas Schmidt, "The Little-Known Story of Deproliferation: Why States Give Up Nuclear Weapons Activities," in *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, vol. 1, *The Role of Theory*, ed. William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 124-158.

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