

Mission Failure: A Book Review

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Michael Mandelbaum's *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* is an impressive book. As a history of U.S. foreign policy in, as he terms it, its "fourth" or "post-cold war" era, from 1991 to 2014, it's a competent work. But as an analysis of the driving forces behind that foreign policy, Mandelbaum has done much more, giving us an intellectual tour de force that captures brilliantly why America did what it did and why it all turned out, to use his title, a failure. No wonder many, beginning with New York Times columnist Tom Friedman, have so praised it. While the book covers the entire globe, nowhere was this failure more apparent than in the Middle East, where, in northern Iraq in 1991, to protect the Kurds against their national government, America launched what he characterizes as a revolutionary policy of engagement in the internal affairs of nations.

Mandelbaum's basic thesis is that, after the Cold War, the United States found itself in a position of rare global power, first and foremost in terms of military might, but also of economic strength and philosophical and moral self-confidence. As he points out, the world was rapidly becoming democratic, and market-based economies and international trade -- both encouraged by the United States -- were driving globalization and prosperity.

However, this power could also be used to reach into states to attempt to ameliorate their internal conditions and basic values in directions America thought wise. Here Mandelbaum argues that this desire was a choice based on "insider" views rather than a necessary response to the core interests of the American people. At the end of the Cold War, the existential threat of nuclear-backed communism had disappeared, and with it the public interest in foreign affairs. The United States, however, was left with a global diplomatic and economic alliance system and military forces deployed far and wide. This country could have pulled back most of its forces and moved toward an alternative universal international organization. Instead, more out of habit than decision, it kept that global posture. It did not cost much and was not of major concern to most Americans; however, it was vital to various smaller groups, including career government officials, the military and "determined minorities."

But the new use to which America's global posture was put was revolutionary: an "engagement of choice" to affect the internal governance of states around the world. In this fourth era, the larger policy goal itself was to have an impact on internal affairs, and for that most ambitious of purposes: to put countries "on the road to Denmark." Such deep engagement required nation-building, which he defines as creating a sense of nationhood from disparate

populations, and state-building, establishing effective and liberal (i.e., Western) institutions -- all to advance a society towards a modern liberal system. Mandelbaum finds this motive behind essentially all of America's major foreign-policy initiatives in the Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama administrations.

The most obvious manifestation of this internal-amelioration motive was in the broader Middle East: Afghanistan from 2001 on, Iraq from 2003, the Arab Spring and Libya in 2013. Mandelbaum, however, convincingly includes four other major cases as having the same motive: policies towards China and Russia; humanitarian interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq before 2003 and Kosovo; international economic policy; and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

What he finds as the common thread in all was not the primacy of American interests but the desire to "vindicate American values," seen as universal. In these four other categories, putting states "on the road to Denmark" initially was not the primary goal. Via paths that differed in each category, however, that motivation eventually led to nation- and state-building, to move societies toward these values. Humanitarian interventions were designed to protect populations, but as U.S. forces and diplomacy became ever more involved, the "mission creep" to justify the engagements and provide a U.S. exit strategy led to the goal of transforming the societies and states we were trying to protect. (The military's argument, to this reviewer, often was, "Without a true change in underlying conditions, we'll just be back in here.")

In the cases of Russia and China, transformation was seen as a means to preserve the "gains" the West had made with their renunciation of hostility towards the United States and commitment to "Westernize" their societies (or, with China, its economy); thus security played an important role. In the case of international economic policy, the instinct to reform states was driven by broad U.S. goals and the U.S.-influenced IMF to fix ailing states' economic, financial and legal systems so they could function in an economic order characterized by globalization, the free flow of money, free trade and market rules.

Finally, in the farthest stretch, Mandelbaum argues that the Arab-Israeli peace process rested on the necessity to change the world view of the Palestinian nation so that it would accept Israel as a Jewish state. But, in Mandelbaum's view, the core problem was that "the Palestinians saw themselves as victims, justice for whom required the abolition of Israel." In that sense, the American effort was as much a (failed) state-building exercise as Iraq.

Why did the United States undertake this deviation from past experience? His curt but telling answer: "because it could." He also cites specific motives and places much stress on the "insider" factor. After 1989, foreign policy was no longer the realm of major national debate, energizing, as did the Cuban Missile Crisis, the entire population. Insider groups had an interest in keeping in place the American "system" but had to do something with that power. Certain of them -- Congress, NGOs and émigré communities ("determined minorities") -- wanted that power to be used for the advancement of a value system. Foisting it on other populations was not self-evident, but it had seemed to work in Germany and Japan after World War II and Eastern Europe after 1989.

What links all of Mandelbaum's examples of U.S. failure is essentially a "barren terrain" theory for imposition of what Americans see as universal values. His blunt explanation for earlier American successes is culture; Japan, Germany and Eastern Europe shared a history and institutions compatible with those of the West. Furthermore, to varying degrees, their populations saw the West as their ally against the real "other": Communism or a resurgent East. Such cultural and institutional prerequisites were almost entirely absent in Russia and China, as well as the Middle East, and to some degree even the Balkans. In the case of Russia and China, the state's -- and part of society's -- reluctance to embrace Western values was reinforced by the inability of the United States to back its missionary activities with force.

Third, while military "victories" were racked up in Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and against al-

Qaeda, "mission creep" led the United States to attempt to transform societies. Even massive U.S. military presence was not enough, however. The imposition of values from the outside, if possible at all, requires a huge commitment of time, money and personnel, along with a willingness to beat down inevitable resistance. As years drag on and resistance continues, the American people eventually pull the plug; they "regard the vindication of American values abroad as a luxury, not a necessity."

As noted initially, Mandelbaum considers this "post-cold-war era" to have ended in 2014. Like Walter Russell Mead, he sees the rise of a set of near-peer competitors -- Russia, China, and, on a lower level, North Korea and Iran -- as necessitating a return to realpolitik. Once again, when American security interests are threatened, the public will sooner or later re-engage, and those "determined minorities" will no longer be able to mobilize American power to pursue their universalist ideals on other people's territory. Furthermore, he blames at least the rise of Russia as a power hostile to the West on internal intervention, specifically the effort to expand NATO.

Before concluding that Mandelbaum will have real impact on the way Americans think about foreign policy, however, it is necessary to revisit one of his arguments. If the desire to maintain American power after the Cold War was, in his view (and mine), all but inevitable, does his argument hold up that the use of that power for values imposition was a "choice" pushed by "determined minorities"?

There is a security argument for "moving countries towards Denmark," assuming it can be done, that engages American national interests and, thus, potentially the support of the public. If all the world were like Denmark, we would be far safer. Mandelbaum himself agrees that it would have been a good thing if we had succeeded in some of our transformational missions. Given all this, it is hard not to think that such a mission is hard-wired into the mindset of those who initiate and carry out our foreign policy.

There are also consequences to the collision of a transformational mindset and our inability successfully to carry out transformation, as Mandelbaum documents. If we are now "hard-wired" to define any acceptable foreign-policy effort, especially involving the military, in these transformational terms, but can neither achieve this transformation, nor convince the American people to allow the government to try, then the United States is left virtually impotent as a global actor, short of direct threats to our existential security. This is what we may be seeing right now, with Syria and ISIS. We have gone from overestimating the utility of our power to assuming we can do next to nothing.

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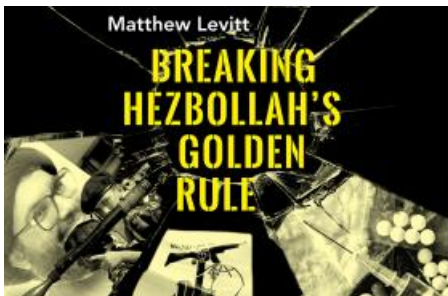
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