

2018

## Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post–Cold War Era

Sam J. Tangredi

Michael Mandelbaum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Tangredi, Sam J. and Mandelbaum, Michael (2018) "Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post–Cold War Era," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 71 : No. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol71/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

### FAILURES AND SUCCESSES

*Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post–Cold War Era*, by Michael Mandelbaum. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016. 485 pages. \$29.95.

“You Americans are so naive” is one of the opening quotes that Michael Mandelbaum uses to introduce *Mission Failure* (p. vi). The quotation does not come, as one might expect, from a foreign world leader, but from Steve Martin on *Saturday Night Live*. Thus, one sees from the first Mandelbaum’s objective: to narrate and explain U.S. foreign policy from 1991 to 2014 in a way that can be understood by interested general readers who might recognize Martin more than they would theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (the source of another opening quotation). In the backdrop of this narrative is the theme of the failure of humanitarian interventionism—the inclination to intervene in world affairs to promote values rather than for direct self-interests—to achieve meaningful results. Mandelbaum describes his intent for the book rather accurately: “Together the chapters tell the story of good, sometimes noble, and thoroughly American intentions coming up against the deeply embedded, often harsh, and profoundly un-American realities of places far from the United States. In this encounter

the realities prevailed” (p. 13). In his perspective, post–Cold War American decision makers viewed the world through a distorted lens that only their country’s enormous relative power made possible. This distorted view caused them to believe that democratic values and human rights could be exported by interventions using armed force. Mandelbaum describes this as “missionary work” transferred from the religious to the political sphere, and links it to the same impulse that established the Peace Corps. He then begins a general historical narrative of American relations with Russia and China, humanitarian interventions from Somalia to Kosovo, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Arab-Israeli conflict, all during the 1991–2014 period. In his final chapter, entitled “Restoration,” he argues that the rise of Chinese economic power and the reemergence of Russia have put an end to the post–Cold War world; the United States no longer has the power to attempt to make changes in other political cultures. To illustrate the enormous relative power that America held at the beginning

of this period, Mandelbaum starts his introduction with the surrender of the Iraqi army to General Norman Schwarzkopf and the other coalition military leaders on March 3, 1991. The author maintains that, up to then, America's latent desire to educate the world on the benefits of democracy and human rights had been held in check only by the existence of powerful rivals—specifically, one powerful rival: the Soviet Union. Suddenly, with that entity collapsed, China apparently quiescent, and the U.S. armed forces having demonstrated their absolute military dominance on (what was considered) the modern battlefield, American political and social leaders could indulge themselves in doing what they perceived to be in the interest of the collective global good. The United States “chose to spend some of its vast reserves of power on the geopolitical equivalent of luxury items: the remaking of other countries” (p. 7). The difference from previous eras was that now the United States became involved in crises in which it had no direct national interest—crises that, no matter their result, would have little if any impact on American freedom or prosperity. The outcome, according to Mandelbaum, has been “mission failure,” given that much of the world has different cultural values concerning the “good” and that the results have been temporary or they have let loose more destructive forces.

Mandelbaum postulates that the cross-over point at which the aim of American foreign policy changed from achieving national interests to performing “missionary work” occurred between the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. He sees the subsequent actions of Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama as a foreign policy of

continuing humanitarian intervention (albeit with differing degrees of overt force), with a shared goal of relieving human suffering and exporting democracy.

Mandelbaum identifies the expansion of NATO—an action that President George H. W. Bush promised the Russians would not occur—as the most catastrophic of mistakes. Against the advice of concerned experts, President Clinton promoted NATO expansion, believing that it would solidify democratic governance throughout Europe without alienating a Russia assumed to have adopted democratic capitalism permanently. The decision “squandered . . . much of the windfall that had come to the United States as the result of the way the Cold War had ended. . . . It did this in return for no gain at all, making NATO expansion one of the greatest blunders in the history of American foreign policy” (p. 69). The author identifies other mistaken actions (such as the Iraq War) and skewers some inept policy makers along the way (Secretaries of State Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright are particular targets), but the alienation of Russia—which facilitated that country's return to internal authoritarianism—was the factor that ultimately ended hopes for a “new world order.”

Mandelbaum, professor of American foreign policy at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins, maintains a solid and comfortable—if relatively uninspiring—writing style, making his argument in measured terms. As in his other recent books, he aims at a broad audience. He gives no indications, however, that his previous work—such as his collaboration with journalist Thomas L. Friedman, the most successful

troubadour of globalization—argued for a spirit of liberal internationalism that leads logically to efforts at humanitarian intervention. To Mandelbaum, the apparent difference between liberal internationalism and the humanitarian-interventionist approach that some U.S. presidents have chosen is that the United States decided to use its resources to rescue people (metaphorically) rather than to concentrate on defending the global system of economic liberalism. However, how one “defends a system” without intervening in particular crises within that system remains rather unclear. Liberal internationalism supposedly is an antidote to great-power politics, but ultimately Mandelbaum concludes that America’s failure at preserving its beneficial role in the international system (and its interests) was the result of not paying most of its attention to, and sometimes accommodating, the reemerging great powers. The “malign effects” of an angry Russia and a contemptuous China, Mandelbaum writes on his final page, “will be felt long after the failed missions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and even Afghanistan and Iraq ha[ve] faded from memory” (p. 381).

SAM J. TANGREDI



*The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counter-Insurgency*, by Walter C. Ladwig III. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017. 360 pages. \$34.99 (paperback).

The advent of a new U.S. presidential administration has resulted in a series of new defense guidance and strategy documents—ranging from the *National Security Strategy* to the *National Defense Strategy* and the *Nuclear Posture*

*Review*—all of which have placed a clear emphasis on the risks posed by the recrudescence of great-power rivalry. The *National Defense Strategy*, in particular, garnered praise from the national security commentariat for its terse declaration that great-power competition, rather than terrorism, now constituted “the primary focus of U.S. national security.” Indeed, for an American public increasingly weary of costly and protracted counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in the Middle East, there was something inherently appealing about this apparent reordering of American defense priorities.

Unfortunately, however, events over the past year have demonstrated repeatedly that this much-touted focal rearrangement is not something that simply can be wished into existence. Indeed, despite running on a platform promising greater disengagement from the Middle East, President Trump has found himself compelled to deploy ever more soldiers to Afghanistan and the Levant. Meanwhile, cabinet officials have suggested that Washington may need to maintain an open-ended military presence in Syria, partly as a means of countering growing Iranian influence. Last but not least, the deadly ambush of a unit of U.S. special operations forces (SOFs) in the deserts of Niger revealed to many baffled American citizens the full extent of their nation’s global counterterrorism footprint: eight thousand SOFs active on any given day in more than eighty countries.

All this underscores the need for U.S. security managers to continue to plan for and debate extended counterterrorism and stabilization campaigns—however much they may pine privately for a post-COIN era. It also renders Ladwig’s recent