

Books

Grand Delusion – America's imposition on incompatible Middle East realities

Steven Simon presents a brilliantly written critique of 45 years of US foreign policy in the Mideast

John Sawers YESTERDAY



US Marines near the Iraqi border in Kuwait, 2003 © Getty Images

The Middle East has been such a feature of US foreign policy in recent decades that we tend to forget that presidents from Truman to Nixon paid little attention to the region. Apart from the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, US priorities were elsewhere — postwar reconstruction in Europe and East Asia, the cold war and its proxy fights, re-engaging with China, getting in then out of Vietnam.

That changed with Jimmy Carter. He had one big foreign policy success, brokering peace between Egypt and Israel, and an even bigger failure, sitting idle while the Shah of Iran's regime fell and then suffering the humiliation of the US embassy occupation that probably cost him a second term in the White House. His successors from Ronald Reagan to the present day have since been drawn into the Middle East as a land of both opportunity and risk.

Steven Simon's *Grand Delusion* is a brilliantly written account of US policy in the region during the past 45 years. Drawing on his career in the state department and

appointments to the National Security Council in the Clinton and Obama administrations, Simon sees the process from the inside and describes in detail the many failures, from Reagan's disastrous intervention in Lebanon through to the catastrophic results of George W Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Barack Obama's confused response to the Arab Spring. At a time when US engagement in the region is declining while that of other actors — Russia and China — is rising, the book is very timely.

The grand delusion of the title refers to the imposition of American ideas about freedom and society on incompatible Middle East realities. The story begins with Reagan's attempt to support Israel's goals in Lebanon after their 1982 invasion, Simon's first example of confused plans fuelled by rose-tinted intentions. The October 1983 Beirut bombings by the newly formed Hizbollah, which killed 241 US marines and 58 French troops, led to a hasty and humiliating withdrawal, leaving Lebanon under the sway of Iran that continues today.





The United States Marine Corps headquarters in Beirut after the bombing attack in 1983 © Bettmann Archive

Western politicians like to assert that politically motivated violence doesn't work. But the bombing of the marine barracks was the first of three deadly attacks — one Shia, one Sunni, one Jewish — that did achieve the perpetrators' goals, shaping Middle East politics for the worse over 30 years.

Ensuring Israel's security has been a point of continuity between US administrations. But attempts to find a solution to the Palestinian question were left until late in the day — and all of them foundered. Simon, who is Jewish himself, raises the sensitive question of whether the largely Jewish team that led US policy on Israel-Palestine through successive administrations was so committed to meeting Israel's goals that they were never able to deliver a result.

It is striking that the peace effort that got closest to success was the Oslo process in the 1990s, conducted behind the back of the Americans. That promising effort was — literally — killed off by a second act of political violence when an Israeli extremist assassinated Yitzhak Rabin, perhaps the only Israeli prime minister of the past 50 years with the political standing and strategic acumen to deliver a peace agreement. Others tried but all fell short, helped of course by dysfunction and weakness on the Palestinian side. Benjamin Netanyahu, now in his 16th year as Israel's prime minister, never had much interest in peace with the Palestinians and efforts have now run dry.

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Iraq is a persistent theme of the book. Simon challenges the conventional wisdom that President Bush's war to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait in 1991 was a success. He questions whether the decision to pursue a military solution was right, speculating that a

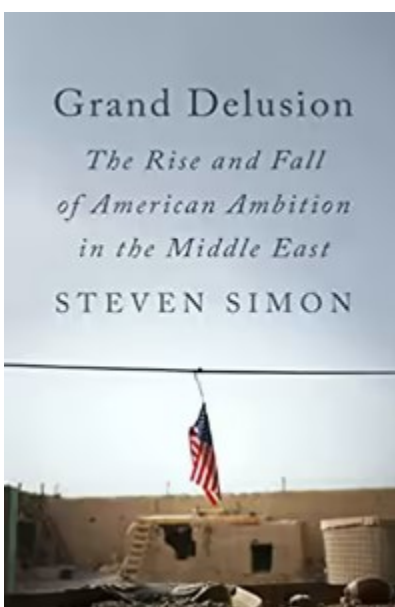
reality

response of sanctions-backed diplomacy
might not have been better in the long run.

He contends that Osama bin Laden was radicalised by the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia that led inexorably to 9/11. He also believes that the unfinished business in Iraq meant a second Iraq war was inevitable.

It's an interesting "What if . . . ?" But for me, his argument isn't compelling. Bin Laden's main goal was to dislocate the Saudi monarchy from American protection so that they could be replaced by an Islamist regime. And a second Iraq war wasn't inevitable — it was a war of choice.

The third decisive terrorist attack was of course 9/11. Bin Laden was killed for it eventually, but he would have been well pleased by the overreaching response of the George W Bush administration that led eventually to the US being dragged down in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Simon reserves his most scathing critique for Bush junior. "Bush's beliefs were, as usual, strongly held, hazy, and disconnected from reality". Over-confidence in his judgment, boastful swagger, self-righteousness and impulsive bellicosity are other charges.



Some of this is valid but I think it is overdone. Bush was a good listener and open to well-phrased challenge. But there is no doubt he was led by his team of vice-President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his Deputy Paul Wolfowitz down a path to war starting with a fabricated claim of Iraqi responsibility for 9/11 and then building a case on shaky intelligence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that could be used by terrorist groups. Colin Powell, secretary of state, and Tony Blair, UK prime minister, each had their chance to divert Bush from the path to war but, in Simon's view, both ducked it.

The Iraq invasion was the high water mark of US intervention in the Middle East. Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, in different ways, have all tried to limit further entanglement.

Obama's big challenge was how to respond to the Arab Spring. Like George W Bush on Iraq, Obama wasn't much interested in the advice of regional experts. Simon gives a vivid account of presidential agonising on Libya and Syria, doing enough to create chaos and instability but not enough to achieve enduring change. The same could be said of British and French efforts. Simon's conclusion was that Obama should probably have followed his instincts and not been drawn in at all.

Obama's singular achievement was the Iran nuclear deal, buying 15 years, in Simon's estimate, of delay in Tehran's weapons programme had the deal stayed in force. A better deal could have been concluded in 2005 on the basis of the E3 (UK, France and Germany) agreement with Iran but the Bush administration failed to join the effort until it was too late.

The 2015 US-Iran deal was still worthwhile. It was agreed in the teeth of opposition by Netanyahu whose bluster and untrustworthiness won him the code name "chickenshit" in the White House. But Israeli opposition ensured a unified Republican position against the nuclear deal and led to Trump taking America out of it in 2018. Since then, of course, Iran has resumed its march to the threshold of nuclear weapons. Hardly a triumph for Trump or Netanyahu.

Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, did succeed in brokering the Abraham Accords between Israel and various Arab states. The deals were crude and transactional but they recognise that Israel is now an established fact in the Middle East. Its existence is no longer at threat. Nor is Saudi Arabia's ruling family, the al-Saud. It comes as a surprise that, after a tough critique of successive US administrations, Simon concludes that America's strategic goals of securing these two countries' futures has been achieved.

Simon predicts that the Middle East will now fade from US priorities, much like Latin America and South-East Asia did after the 1970s. I am not so sure. Like Al Pacino in *The Godfather III*, just as America thinks it is getting out of the Middle East, events may conspire to pull them back in.

Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East by Steven Simon *Penguin Press* £25.76/\$32, 496 pages

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