

FT Swamp Notes [US politics & policy](#)

America must relearn diplomacy – the Eizenstat way

The US is losing the art of serious statecraft



Stuart Eizenstat went from senior Carter adviser, to ambassador to the EU, to the Holocaust restitution talks © AP

Edward Luce OCTOBER 18 2024

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“Study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft.” — Winston Churchill.

Washington is full of people who are famous inside the beltway but obscure beyond it. In rare cases, such as that of Stuart Eizenstat, they deserve far wider recognition. I say this because I have just finished Eizenstat’s intriguing new book, *The Art of Diplomacy*. If there was ever a good moment to immerse yourself in the subject of where American diplomacy has succeeded and failed over the past half-century, now would be it. Whoever moves into the White House next January — Swampians might have guessed that my strong bias is for Kamala Harris — will need all the diplomatic nous they can muster.

First, a little about Eizenstat. Actual Swampians (those who dwell within the I-495 Capital Beltway) need no introduction. Eizenstat’s political career began as a young Atlanta-based lawyer on Jimmy Carter’s successful 1970 Georgia gubernatorial campaign. He played a senior role in Carter’s semi-miraculous 1976 presidential bid and became his senior White House domestic adviser for the next four years. He was Bill Clinton’s ambassador to the EU in the 1990s, then America’s lead negotiator for the 1997 Kyoto protocol on what we then called “greenhouse gas emissions”. He was deputy US Treasury secretary for Clinton’s last 18 months. In that role he drove the start of the Holocaust restitution talks that resulted in deals with Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France. To descendants of those who died in the Holocaust, or whose family assets were looted, Eizenstat is deservedly well known. To others, much less so.

The Art of Diplomacy is not a memoir. What I admire most about the book is that Eizenstat has devoured the scholarship of, and interviewed, many of the living participants from the episodes that he showcases — from Sinn Féin’s Gerry Adams to America’s former deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick (with 125 interviewees in total). This is in spite of the fact that a) he is an octogenarian, and b) has rich diplomatic experience; he was directly involved in two of his 12 examples (Kyoto and Holocaust restitution), and peripherally in some of the others. Point a) would drain most people of the energy; point b) is generally conducive to being a know-it-all. I doff my hat to the effort he put into his reporting and the self-abnegation that entails. Most important, though, I found his final product to be pressingly relevant.

America is losing the art of serious diplomacy. By that I mean making deals with her enemies. Reaching informal arrangements with partners, such as beefing up the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, or with formal allies, such as revitalising Nato, is one thing — and not to be belittled; finding common ground with adversaries to further America’s national interest is quite another. Unless the US can relearn how to do the latter, we are in dire straits.

One of Eizenstat’s most vivid examples is the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué that Richard Nixon co-

signed with China's Mao Zedong. Though the story of the China opening is surpassingly well-known, Eizenstat's account is enriched by the fact that he is a practitioner. America and China had nothing in common in the early 1970s and were bitter ideological rivals. But their shared dread of the Soviet Union outweighed all else. The two simply agreed to disagree on all the rest. They even wrote down in the communiqué where they differed. That was hard-nosed pragmatism. Today's equivalent to the USSR threat is global warming. Both America and China should fear climate change more than each other. The goal of an aspiring statesperson might be to start with that realisation. Diplomacy, like life, is about sorting out your priorities.

This is not a book review so I won't paraphrase Eizenstat's many examples. These span high points, such as the 1991 reunification of Germany, the 1995 Bosnia Dayton Accords, and the 1998 Anglo-Irish Good Friday Agreement, and low points, like the 1997 Kyoto protocol (killed by the US Senate), the 1973 deal on America's withdrawal from Vietnam, and the Middle East in general since Donald Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018. Nor will I try to do justice to the lessons Eizenstat draws for future negotiators. As the Churchill quote at the top of this note implies, there is no shortcut to knowing history. Cliff Notes will not substitute.

Likewise, there is no neat academic formula that could encapsulate the blend of situational luck, emotional intelligence, opportunistic energy, presidential backing, detailed knowledge of your opponent and courageous risk-taking that yields breakthrough diplomacy. The skill of making deals with other countries is only distantly related to other forms of negotiation. There is no world court that will enforce contracts between nations. Unlike commercial parties, countries do not have the luxury of bidding farewell on the handshake. Both sides must thus come out of a deal believing themselves to be the winner.

There is no need for me to list the foreign policy migraines confronting the next US president — literal and honorary Swampians are familiar with today's so-called polycrisis. But I feel moved to point out that America's diplomatic ambitions seem unusually dwarfed by America's military resources. Today's DC national security debate is virtually monopolised by how the Pentagon urgently requires a bigger budget to deal with the China challenge. Perhaps that is merited. It is a rare conversation that dwells on the need for far-sighted diplomacy.

I'm turning for this note's response to Ivo Daalder, president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and a former US ambassador to Nato. Ivo, rather than corner you with one question, please cherry-pick what you think is worth debating.

Recommended reading

My latest column [appraises America's "dead-heat election"](#). In my embarrassingly extensive experience of US presidential elections, I find no obvious parallel to 2024. I also took a stab this week at explaining shamelessness in US public life nowadays: ["Where has America's shame gone?"](#) I should add that the US is afflicted by asymmetric shamelessness. Republicans are way ahead of Democrats.

My colleague, Brooke Masters, wrote a very interesting column on modern forms of corporate price collusion that tap proprietorial algorithmic data for price advantage. Her piece ["Why has your Big Mac become so expensive?"](#) will surely be read by Lina Khan, controversial head of the US Federal Trade Commission.

Finally, an apology for calling Eizenstat old (he was born in 1943). Here's a New York Times report on [Eizenstat's centenarian former boss casting his vote this week for Kamala Harris](#). Calvin Coolidge was president when Carter was born.

Ivo Daalder responds

I haven't had the chance to read Eizenstat's book, but now I will. (Stu, you owe Ed for another sale!) Lots of people have commented on how secretary of state Antony Blinken's monthly trips to the Mideast in some ways resemble the shuttle diplomacy that Henry Kissinger made famous in the mid-1970s. But the differences are more striking, in ways you and Eizenstat suggest. Kissinger spent months in the region, going back and forth between warring antagonists who wouldn't talk to each other. And he didn't leave until a deal was done. Blinken has travelled to the region nearly every month since October 7 and is there for a few days, flying from one capital to another to try and do big things (a ceasefire in Gaza, or historic deal with Saudi Arabia) and small (get more aid into Gaza). But his efforts aren't sustained, focused and relentless in the way Kissinger's were when he shuttled between capitals to reduce the pressure on the parties to reach — and stick to — a deal.

In defence of the Blinken effort, it's fair to note that the two main parties (Israel and Hamas) don't actually want a deal. At least not yet. Both Benjamin Netanyahu and Yahya Sinwar ([when he was still alive](#)) believed that victory lay in continuing the war, not ending it. But the point of diplomacy is to change the incentives and framework in ways that move parties from irreconcilable positions to a deal both see as a win. Syria, Egypt and Israel also had irreconcilable positions in the mid-1970s — but Kissinger helped convince them that stopping the fight was in all their interest. And when they agreed, some reassessed their strategy in ways that were impossible to think of when the fighting was still intense. The world was lucky to have an Anwar Sadat to see peace as preferable to war. But it took hard diplomacy to get him there — and then even harder diplomacy to negotiate the first peace agreement between Israel and an Arab state — a feat made possible by the skilled diplomacy of Eizenstat's old boss.

Your feedback

And now a word from our Swampians . . .

"I write to urge you to pay attention to an election issue that gets too little attention . . . [Schedule F](#) in light of Trump's obsession with revenge. This is truly scary. But his list of several dozen enemies who will be vulnerable (Liz Cheney to Mark Milley to Mitt Romney and so many more) is just the tip of the iceberg. Imagine a successful (and quick) promulgation of Schedule F putting 50,000 Trump loyalists in charge of the government. This of course gives Trump utter power to attack his enemies, with no constraints. But it also gives all 50,000 new Trumpians the power to attack their enemies (real and imagined); easily tens of thousands of people, businesses, and institutions."

— Roger Rogowsky

Your feedback

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