

Try Again

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ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, *Second Chance: Three American Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower* (Basic Books, 2007), 240 pp., \$26.95. Hardcover.

Almost 20 years have passed since the end of the Cold War, and contemporary international politics is defined not by U.S.-Soviet rivalry but by American empire. This new era has its own benefits and problems for the United States. But while some (ethnic conflict, civil war, globalization and proliferation, to name just a few) have been thoroughly examined by scholars, pundits, and analysts alike, a serious survey of others has been conspicuously absent. In his new book, *Second Chance*, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski addresses one of the most important: American leadership.

Brzezinski begins his discussion with an evaluation of the stewards of American power since 1990: Presidents George H. W. Bush (Global Leader I), Bill Clinton (Global Leader II), and George W. Bush (Global Leader III). Each is graded on the eight issues Brzezinski considers the most important of the period: the health of the Atlantic Alliance; policy toward the “post-Soviet space,” the Far East, and the Middle East; and responses to proliferation, peace-

keeping, the environment, and global trade and poverty.

According to Brzezinski, Global Leader I had great tactical skill and handled well the end of the Cold War and the 1991 Gulf War, but missed opportunities in the Middle East, allowed Iraq to fester and ignored Afghanistan. His performance therefore merits a “B.” President Clinton, for his part, had great promise. He brought stability to the Balkans and expanded NATO. But he failed to perform, particularly in the Middle East. For these deficiencies, he receives a “C.” However, both do far better than Global Leader III, President George W. Bush, who gets an “F.” On President Bush’s report card, Brzezinski writes the comment: “A simplistic dogmatic worldview prompts self-destructive unilateralism.”

Brzezinski believes that America has failed in its ability to lead the world thus far, but now has a second chance to do so. His solution is for the United States to forge a positive relationship with the European Union in order to create an “Atlantic Community” capable of engaging Russia and arresting proliferation, all the while ensuring solidarity in the face of rising threats, like China, that America should not address on its own.

But it is Brzezinski himself who should try again. Three major problems dominate his analysis. The first



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concerns his unbalanced assessment of the presidents. By any objective measure, the first President Bush dealt with the greatest crises of the three. It was he who managed the peaceful end of the Cold War, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War, Germany's reunification within NATO—not neutrality, as the Soviets wanted—and the START treaties. It was he who built upon Reagan's plans for a credible missile defense for the United States and developed GPALS, all the while navigating America's relationship with China through dangerous waters following the Tiananmen Square massacre. His problems were the equal of Harry Truman's at the beginning of the Cold War, and, by any consideration, Bush mastered them far better than Truman did his.

The assessment of Clinton is fawning in its avoidance of obvious criticisms. Here is a President who inherited the post-Cold War world, and then proceeded to take a "time out." Clinton fiddled while the threat from Islamic terrorism burned. There is no mention of bin Laden's declarations of war against the American people in Brzezinski's book, or of the Bojinka terror plot and the Khobar Towers bombing. Other attacks, such as the 1998 embassy bombings in Africa and the year 2000 strike on the USS *Cole*, are passed over quickly. At other points—such as the discussion of the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993—Brzezinski's narrative is rife with errors. These mistakes and oversights leave the impression that Brzezinski takes the threat of terrorism about as seriously as Clinton did.

Brzezinski's treatment of George W. Bush, on the other hand, is so harsh as to be cartoonish—a litany of grievances against a president who Brzezinski believes was too

naïve, too unilateral and too aggressive to have ever been entrusted with the reins of power. Given his bias, one is compelled to remind Brzezinski that it was Bush, not Clinton, who took the battle to al-Qaeda, brought about the disarmament of Libya, and rolled up the clandestine proliferation network of A.Q. Khan. Perhaps most important, George W. Bush's recognition that the Cold War is, indeed, over has empowered dramatic changes in foreign and defense policies—among them the realization of a defense against ballistic missiles through the U.S. exit from the ABM Treaty. Instead, Brzezinski minimizes the contemporary terrorist threat, and makes hay out of the friction between some European states and the U.S. over Iraq. This makes for good copy, of course, but Iraq was not the first problem in the Atlantic relationship. Nor will it be the last.

The second major problem with *Second Chance* concerns the eight issues provided for comparison. No book can cover all topics, but Brzezinski's selection will strike many readers as odd. Not to consider the issue of terrorism, given its centrality during the 1990s and particularly today, is exceedingly odd. Other issues, meanwhile, are given disproportionate weight. Thus, Brzezinski believes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to Middle East peace, and that it will only be resolved when Israel surrenders more territory and makes more sacrifices. To his credit, Brzezinski mentions the critical issue of demographics, and declining birthrates in the West for all but immigrant populations, particularly Muslims in Europe—a reality that will have serious consequences for his prospective Atlantic Community in the not-too-distant future. Unfortunately, though, he

does not explore the issue in the detail it requires.

The third deficiency in Brzezinski's work is his gross underestimation of the continuity of American power. His analysis is so skewed that readers might be justified in believing that America is on its last legs. There is no recognition that the real Global Leader, the United States itself, is going to be on top for years to come. And, when it comes to the future, Brzezinski's lugubrious tone neglects the tremendous good that flows from U.S. power.

In a work that considers America's role in the world and the ends for which the United States should use its power, one might expect recognition of the facts of life in international politics today and for the foreseeable future. Despite Brzezinski's lamentation about the fallout from Iraq, the reality is that countries want to align themselves with America. Of 192 countries in the world, 84 are currently engaged in some form of partnership with the United States. Never before in history has a nation had so many allies. America's adversaries, meanwhile, are few and far between. Presently, only five countries can be counted as directly opposed to the United States: China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela.

This alignment is logical; U.S. power makes the world more peaceful than it otherwise would be. During the Cold War, American leadership reduced friction among many states that were historical antagonists, most notably France and West Germany. Today, U.S. primacy helps keep a number of complicated relationships, such as the one between Greece and Turkey, from boiling over.

Finally, no discussion of American leadership can be complete without the acknowledgement that

the U.S. is the world's last line of defense. The United States serves as the world's *de facto* police force, the global paramedic, and the planet's fire department. In fact, all of the key components of the current international order—free trade, a robust monetary regime, increasing respect for human rights, growing democratization—are directly linked to U.S. power and leadership.

In Brzezinski's calculus, those whose challenges were historic and whose efforts were Herculean, as were the efforts of the first President Bush, are graded by the standard of perfection—he left Iraq and Afghanistan untidy. At the same time, Clinton's foreign policy was Lilliputian in scope, particularly in his first term. He did not face the threats of the Cold War, and his feckless handling of al-Qaeda contributed to 9/11, but is fêted by comparison. The foreign policy of George W. Bush is simply demonized. Looking at the grades assigned, both students and readers should avoid Prof. Brzezinski for the same reason: He is anything but fair in his assessments.

