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Book Review by David P. Goldman

The Case for Benign Neglect

Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era, by Michael Mandelbaum.
Oxford University Press, 504 pages, \$29.95



Michael Mandelbaum sat down a year ago to write what one dust-jacket blurb calls “a startlingly original, creative new book.” Like Rip van Winkle, he awoke in a new era, and now finds himself in the center of the new conventional wisdom.

In *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era*, Mandelbaum argues that America pursued the wrong goals after 1991 and, inevitably, failed. What at this is no longer controversial was emphatically demonstrated in the voting booth. None of the Republican presidential candidates who took up George W. Bush’s foreign policy agenda survived the first few presidential primaries. The eventual nominee, Donald Trump, told the *New York Times* in March that “[i]f our presidents would have just gone to the beach and enjoyed the ocean and the sun, we would’ve been much better off in the Middle East.” Except for some former officials eager to defend their records, the old activist foreign policy has few advocates.

It is quite a turnaround in the American consensus, and also a big change for Mandelbaum, director of the American Foreign Policy program at Johns Hopkins University. In *The Case for Goliath*—at the height of the Bush Administration’s democracy promotion efforts in late 2005—Mandelbaum noted approvingly that the United States was acting like a world government, providing public goods around the globe in the form of security, economic stability, and financial markets, without which the world order would cease to function. He thought this would last until the cost of entitlements crowded out funding for foreign policy—at some far distant date.

It is exuberantly Americanocentric vision vanished much sooner than anticipated. Just five years later, in *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era*, Mandelbaum argued that, following the 2008 financial crash, America no longer could afford to govern the world. His latest book outlines the reasons for our failures in nation-

and state-building, and the continuing price we pay for our mistakes.

Though it seems hastily written and lightly proofread, *Mission Failure* makes a point of critical importance. Mandelbaum gained prominence during the ’90s as a critic of the Clinton Administration’s human-rights activism, which he thought pursued goals peripheral to American interests and failed to achieve those goals—in Somalia, Haiti, and above all in the former Yugoslavia. He notes that “most of the members of the Clinton administration, including the president, would have preferred to have had nothing to do with the conflict in Kosovo.” Least of all did they want to back dodgy Albanian separatists with ties to narcotics and human trafficking.

The Kosovo Liberation Army nonetheless lured America into the conflict:

The KLA had no hope of evicting the Serbs and winning independence on its



own. It aimed, rather, to provoke a Serb reaction sufficiently visible and brutal to trigger intervention by the West, which did have the military means to force the Serbs out of the province. That is exactly what happened.

Muslim radicals learned the lesson well. That is the purpose of Palestinian attacks on Israelis: to provoke a response like Serbia's and a solution like Kosovo. As the Palestinian journalist Mohammed Daraghmech wrote last October,

Palestine is an international issue. [The issue] won't be decided in a flurry of knives or acts of martyrdom [suicide attacks], or in protests or demonstrations. It will end only when the world understands it has a duty to intervene and to draw borders and lines, as it did in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Kosovo.

In this grisly farce, Palestinians emplace rockets behind human shields to maximize their own civilian death toll—something no previous combatant in history has attempted to do—while the Israeli army embeds human-rights lawyers in combat units.

Mandelbaum scorns the “peace processors” obsessed with a solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict which will never come so long as the Palestinian side believes it can eliminate the Jewish national presence in the region. That belief arises in large measure, he might have added, from the Muslims’ canny estimation of the West’s squeamishness and moralizing narcissism. Like the Kosovo Albanians, the Palestinians threaten to create a humanitarian catastrophe of such terrible dimensions that the West will feel compelled to intervene. It recalls the old illustration of *chutzpah*: the son who murdered his father asking for mercy because he is an orphan.

The same squeamishness impelled Western Europe to accept over a million Muslim migrants during 2015, with more arriving in 2016. Whether the Turks deliberately encouraged the migration that swamped European border controls is hard to determine, but they certainly turned the migrants into political leverage, extorting €3 billion in return for discouraging further migration.

Having managed to earn the ire of both the United States and Russia by giving covert assistance to the Islamic State, Turkey now finds itself in diplomatic isolation. Nonetheless, Ankara has parlayed its weakness into strength by exploiting Europe’s humanitar-

ian impulses. Once blackmailed, Europe has opened itself to future blackmail. According to the leaked minutes of an October meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and European officials, Erdogan warned that he could send Syrian refugees to Greece and Bulgaria and allow thousands to drown on Turkish shores. It seems odd for the head of a Muslim country to threaten Europeans with the deaths of thousands of Muslims, but that is what the West taught Muslims to do in Kosovo.

What would it take to unlearn the lesson of Kosovo, and dissuade Turks, Palestinians, and others from using humanitarian disasters for diplomatic leverage? Mandelbaum does not say, but the answer seems clear from his reading of the Kosovo debacle: the West must exercise benign neglect towards humanitarian calamities. If we submit to moral blackmail, we risk building humanitarian disasters towards an unmanageable critical mass. Some prominent voices in the West—such as French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy—argue that interventions like the Libyaniasco are necessary to show moderate Muslims that we care about them. Sadly, the outcome has been to show radical Muslims that they can manipulate us.

America’s misplaced humanitarianism has had baleful consequences from Libya to Iraq to Afghanistan. But questioning the premises of American policy at the time brought with it pariah status: “It [was not] acceptable to venture the opinion that the inhabitants of Haiti, or the Balkans, or Afghanistan, or Iraq were incapable, under existing conditions, of building and sustaining Western-style institutions and practices, even though that proved to be true. Such sentiments would have been treated as ethnocentric bordering on racist,” writes Mandelbaum. “America’s own political culture and the circumstances of the post-Cold War world combined to make the missions the country undertook seem initially plausible in the eyes of those responsible for them.”

Foreign policy, Mandelbaum avers, cannot ignore the fact that “in all human endeavors culture matters”—an assertion we first encounter in his discussion of the war in Afghanistan. The trouble is that

[t]he Bush administration believed what Americans had believed since before the founding of the republic...[they] were confident that what those people wanted for themselves was what all people wanted, which was more or less what Americans wanted.

is a contentious generalization, stated as if it were an unobjectionable platitude. It surely is not the case that Americans always have believed that all peoples wanted what they wanted. The Pilgrims confessed a Calvinism that foresaw the salvation only of a small Elect. Having ended the thirty Years War, they saw themselves as survivors of a dying and self-destructive civilization. The founders listened in fear and trembling to the sermons of Jonathan Edwards and staked their lives and fortunes on the most improbable gamble that prosperous and unpersecuted men had ever ventured. Calvinist exceptionalism prevailed through the administrations of John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln.

As Joseph Bottum argues in *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (2014), America today remains under the spell of the Social Gospel, which, emerging in the post-Civil War era, changed the object of Christianity from personal salvation to world betterment. Walter Russell Mead notes that the Social Gospel was the source of “the Baby Boom generation’s ethos of service.”

The mainline Protestant cultural consensus was bolstered by classical political rationalism and neo-omist natural law theory. These three currents fused into the consensus view Mandelbaum describes. To question that consensus was tantamount to anti-social behavior—until the consensus imploded during the present election cycle.

We are all essentialists now. It has been borne in upon us that culture is central. The trouble is that we have few conceptual tools to apply to the problem. America confronts adversaries gripped by existential anguish so great that it moves tens and potentially hundreds of thousands of them to kill themselves in order to harm enemy civilians. Nothing quite like this has happened before.

The main cultural obstacle to democracy mentioned by Mandelbaum is kinship, which is certainly a salient feature of Middle Eastern societies. He writes that “the social structure of the region worked against democracy by giving rise to loyalties too narrow to support institutions based on impersonal norms, a requirement for democratic government. Arab societies had as their basic unit the tribe.” Ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East “did not regard it as natural or desirable to live in a country in which each group had equal political rights, which is the necessary condition for democracy.”

is well-trodden ground, and certainly true; but kinship as such does not explain the most alarming developments in the region.

ISIS is not a kinship network; on the contrary, it draws on fighters from Surrey to Xinjiang, who abandon their kin to wage jihad. Nor for that matter is Hezbollah, which began as a militia with strong roots in Lebanon's Shia Muslim community, yet has lost roughly one-third of its frontline fighters in Syria, far from their homes, for the greater glory of the Shiite cause.

Globalization and war have undermined kinship networks, freeing hundreds of thousands and prospectively many millions of young men to adopt an apocalyptic stance towards this transformation. Islam has many interpretations, but one that greatly resonates with Islam's militant origins channels the existential despair of the bulge generation of young Muslims into homicidal and suicidal behavior. Traditional society cannot stand up to the global gale. Most of the former strongholds of Catholicism in Southern and Eastern Europe lost their faith in a single generation, and their fertility rates—a gauge that is highly correlated to religiosity—are among the world's lowest.

How should we understand the stresses in Islamic culture and their strategic implications? The default answer has been to ask the West to stand surety for disastrous outcomes in Muslim civilization. This has only reinforced the Muslim sense of entitlement and drawn the West into deeper obligations.

Mandelbaum has little to say about the cultures of Russia and China. Here the notion of kinship has little relevance: both are multi-ethnic empires, albeit with different characteristics. Apart from the United States, no country has succeeded more than China at integrating disparate ethnicities. It did so not by attracting individual immigrants but by annexing all the territories up to its natural frontiers and forcing their inhabitants to learn the Chinese characters (sometimes exterminating those who refused to integrate). China created itself by expanding a coercive, imperial culture that has prevailed for three thousand years.

How should we understand Chinese culture in the context of China's rise as a power

on the international scene? China has never shown an interest in projecting power past the outer boundary of Chinese culture, which it treats as sacrosanct and in defense of which it will make war. Will China's "One Belt, One Road" scheme and its financial arm, the Asian Infrastructure Bank, make China a dominant Eurasian power? Mandelbaum does not mention these efforts. The Shanghai Cooperation Agreement, a possible competitor to NATO, is mentioned once in passing.

Mandelbaum remarks that America failed to foster democratic reforms in Russia because "Vladimir Putin steadily eroded the democratic institutions and practices that his predecessor Boris Yeltsin had tried, unsteadily, to establish in Russia." Putin continues to enjoy overwhelming popularity in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, to the consternation of American analysts, even under sharply deteriorating economic conditions. Russian nationalism and Eastern Orthodox messianism appeal to Russians, who appear to prefer an ecstatic collective identity to the bland individualism of modern Western democracies. It is worth noting that Russia's fertility rate has recovered from a low of just 1.17 births per female in 2000 to 1.71 in 2013, a rare event in demographic history. Russian culture has shown surprising resilience, and not for the first time. The foreign policy establishment wrote off Russia in the 1990s and ignored Russia's return as a power until Putin seized the initiative in Syria.

Russia's success in Syria illustrates Mandelbaum's Kosovo thesis: Russia made no pretense of humanitarian motives, and showed little concern about civilian casualties when it bombed opponents of the Assad regime. American rules of engagement, by contrast, were so averse to collateral damage that most of the American warplanes sent to attack ISIS never released their bombs. Even with a weaker military, Russia was more effective than the West because it did not allow humanitarian concerns to tie its hands.

Russia and China are paranoid about America's intentions, but even paranoids have enemies. As Mandelbaum suggests, it is to America's benefit to persuade Russia and Chi-

na that we view them as competitors rather than enemies. It is important to draw clear lines and stick to them. In some fields we may work with Moscow and Beijing—for example counterterrorism—even as we oppose them elsewhere. Too much American policy thinking was beguiled by the naïve hope that Russia and China would embrace American values, or the vain expectation that they would implode. Too little thought has been given to managing in a world in which America has the most power but not a monopoly.

Mandelbaum has long argued that the expansion of NATO after the fall of Communism served no purpose except to unsettle the Russians. This, he believes, contributed to Russia's decision to flout international law in Ukraine. NATO expansion may have been counterproductive, but was largely beside the point. Putin cared much less about Poland and the Czech Republic than he did about Ukraine. I am told by an eyewitness that when Putin saw the news of the Orange Revolution on the night of November 22, 2004, he exploded: "I'll never trust [the Americans] again!" Conflict between the Catholic, Ukrainian-speaking western part of the country and the Russian-speaking east was hard to avoid, and Mandelbaum does not propose a solution. Partition has long seemed to me the logical outcome.

The winners in the post-Cold War world will be those who best can manage its instability, which is a euphemism for relapsing into occasional cruelty. Putin's ability to play a weak hand effectively stems from this insight. America's post-Cold War vision of a stable and democratic world order, as Mandelbaum argues, was a failure across the board. The longer we foster the hope that the West will do anything in order to avoid humanitarian catastrophe, the more our opponents will use humanitarian brinkmanship to get what they want.

David P. Goldman is a columnist for Asia Times, and the author of How Civilizations Die (and Why Islam Is Dying Too) (Regnery).

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