

KICKING THE HORNET'S NEST



U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN
THE MIDDLE EAST FROM
TRUMAN TO TRUMP

DANIEL E. ZOUGHBBIE

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U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East from Truman to Trump

By Daniel E. Zoughbie

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Advance Praise for KICKING THE HORNET'S NEST:

"A thought-provoking examination of American policymaking in one of the world's most volatile regions. Whether readers agree with Zoughbie's conclusions or not, his book will force them to reconsider whether decades of intervention have done more harm than good." —*Washington Post*

"Learning the lessons recounted in this book will inform whether U.S. foreign policy succeeds or fails in the future."
—Leon E. Panetta, former Director CIA, Secretary of Defense

"An engrossing account of how the blunders, indecisiveness, and exalted hubris of 12 presidents from Truman through Trump's first term have transformed the Middle East into a destabilizing force...A stimulating, well-researched examination."

—*Kirkus*, starred review

About the book:

KICKING THE HORNET'S NEST by Daniel E. Zoughbie is a compelling, groundbreaking investigation of how the choices of twelve US presidents, from Truman to Trump, have fueled turbulence and turmoil in the Middle East. And the one president who chose a better way. Today, the Middle East stands as a volatile landscape, more tumultuous than at any time since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Nearly every major nation-state in the Middle East and North Africa has grappled with existential crises in the recent years, paving the way for terrorist groups to threaten national sovereignty and for local conflicts to destabilize world order. But how did we get here? Zoughbie explores how the last 80 years of US foreign policy, Presidents have chosen defense over diplomacy and development. These attempts to shape the world in America's image via violence have had far-reaching consequences, many of which we are now seeing play out. And the stakes for all of us are higher than ever.

Most Americans would likely agree that the current US foreign policy in the Middle East isn't working. But as Zoughbie explains, there is a better way. Only one US President in the last 80 years has taken this route, but in order to stop nuclear proliferation and prevent the spread of irreversible violence, we need to reembrace soft power.

About the author:

Daniel E. Zoughbie is a complex-systems scientist, a historian, and an expert on presidential decision-making. He is associate project scientist at the Institute of International Studies at UC Berkeley; a faculty affiliate of the UCSF/UCB Center for Global Health Delivery, Diplomacy, and Economics; and a faculty affiliate at the New England Complex Systems Institute in Cambridge. He is also principal investigator of the Middle East and North Africa Diplomacy, Development, and Defense Initiative and author of *Indecision Points: George W. Bush and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (MIT Press, 2014). His award-winning research has been published in journals such as *PLOS Medicine*, *PLOS Complex Systems*, *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, *JAIDS*, and *Social Science and Medicine*. Zoughbie has been appointed to positions at Georgetown University, Stanford University, Harvard University, University of Bologna, University College Dublin, University of Athens, and Campus Bio Medico University of Rome. Zoughbie graduated Phi Beta Kappa from UC Berkeley. He studied at Oxford on a Marshall Scholarship and completed his doctorate, also at Oxford, as a Weidenfeld Scholar.



More Praise for KICKING THE HORNET'S NEST:

"This book is a must-read for those wanting to understand the complexities involved in Middle East conflicts and the reasons why our policies have failed."

—**General Anthony Zinni, USMC (retired), former commander in chief of CENTCOM, and former US special envoy to Israel and the Palestinian Authority**

"Daniel E. Zoughbie tracks the tensions in foreign policy—the incidentals of urgent personalities and the fundamentals of enduring national interest—between the shallow and the deep. Most importantly, he underscores the need for wisdom and reflection when interfering in the affairs of other nations. I wish I had read his book years ago."

—**Sir Mark Allen CMG, former head of MI6 Counter-Terrorism and honorary fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford**

"I strongly encourage you to read this thoroughly researched study from Daniel E. Zoughbie."

—**Admiral Bobby R. Inman, US Navy (retired), former director of the National Security Agency, and former deputy director of the CIA**

Q & A with author Daniel E. Zoughbie

What drew you to this field of study and to writing this book?

I was partially drawn to the field of international security and foreign policy as a result of my work in the field of global health and development. My efforts involved creating behavioral interventions for the prevention and management of type-2 diabetes in the Middle East. I became interested in human behaviors, human decisions—not just at a micro scale but at a macro level.

What struck me was both how important top-down decision-makers—especially US presidents—were to just about every aspect of life for the region’s hundreds of millions of people. And also how frequently they failed in their ability to “manage history.”

In other words, they were good at shaking things up and making things a lot worse. But terrible at meeting fundamental personal and national objectives. I had the benefit of observing first-hand how people in the region and around the world reacted to the projection of American power—in ways that were unexpected and too many to count. Defiance, fear, anger, violence, bitterness. This is what I call Tolstoy’s Law and it is pretty much the only iron law of international relations. What was said by the ancient prophets and philosophers was true for Napoleon—and was and still remains true for US presidents. The plans of the powerful are confounded by the twists and turns of the historical process.

Did anything surprise you in your research?

I was shocked by my conclusion: that Gerald Ford would have been the president to look to as the model. Not Bush Sr. Not Carter. Not Eisenhower. But Gerald Ford, who was never elected president.

I went into this research thinking that I would find that US foreign policy was a bit more successful at protecting its own national interests—at least under some presidents who are thought to have been a bit more sober-minded. The major players advising the presidents—and the presidents themselves—were often brilliant people with high IQs. Sometimes, they were people, frankly, with good intentions who I could somewhat relate to at a human level. They faced enormous strain and peril.

Yet time and again, they shot the country and themselves in the foot. Many fought through and lived through hell. The twentieth century was hell if you think about it. Some estimate that up to 120 million people died. Technology had made it possible to end all human life. But we now risk making the twenty-first century a deeper hell. When we start seeing countries with nuclear and threshold nuclear capabilities exchanging threats and engaging in kinetic attacks—this should be very sobering.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions you encounter about diplomacy and the Middle East?

It seems to me that the most basic idea that foreign policy is about getting other nations to do what we want is totally wrong-headed. There seems to be a belief in Washington that diplomacy and development are inferior to defense. That diplomacy and development activities are more for window-dressing, rather than substance. And that using these tools when utilized on their own constitute appeasement. Anyone who has ever had an argument with another person knows that it’s important to have lag time. Give things time to work themselves out and cool down. It’s a good idea to think before you speak so as not to make things worse. Diplomacy buys time. It clears up misunderstandings. Development wins friends. It wins market share. It wins goodwill. It wins lives. And it gives time for international coalitions to work.

Look at George W. Bush’s emergency plan for HIV for Africa. Despite his reputation elsewhere, this plan made him the most popular US president in the region to this day. Look at the Marshall Plan for Europe—one of the greatest diplomatic and development achievements in human history. Look at Lincoln’s post-civil war Reconstruction in the US—again a stunning achievement. By contrast, look at what happened after the Versailles peace conference where the German’s had their fields, as it were, salted. What happened next?

What is a CEP and why is it so important to understand them?

A Pathogen with Pandemic Potential (PPP) is something like Sars-Cov-2 that can shut down the world in a few weeks or months because there is a clear escalatory pathway to epidemic and then pandemic. It can kill large numbers of people quickly. I describe an analogous Conflict with Extinction Potential (CEP). This is a conflict that has the potential to get out of hand fast. Bob McNamara said that the 1967 war was one of three of the most dangerous moments in human history. The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Crisis were the other two. Let that sink in. This means that 1/3 of the most dangerous moments in human history were related to the Middle East. I would add the JFK assassination, the Yom Kippur War, and the current interconnected Middle East and Ukraine wars to his list. That's 3/6 dangerous moments that are connected to the Middle East, and in particular, the Israeli-Palestinian situation. If we consider the recent 2025 conflict between a nuclear armed India and a nuclear Pakistan another case, then we are 4/7.

In many ways, I consider Pakistan, which was partly conquered by Islamic empires and uses a derivative of an Arabic script, to be connected both to the Middle East and South Asia. (Some people today might call the Middle East "South-West Asia," but that is an equally constructed term that came into fashion during the Cold War.)

The India-Pakistan conflict seriously calls into question the principle of deterrence between nuclear powers. In the book I don't describe this conflict, but I do show that nuclear proliferation in Pakistan was partly a result of poor US foreign policy in the Middle East. We were more focused on preventing supposed Soviet domination than preventing proliferation.

Is there a President's foreign policy style that proves instructional in this moment—for better or worse?

Gerald Ford really did get it right. He knew what the right thing to do was and he did it. He used Kissinger's intellectual powers as a force for good along with the latter's personal relationship with Rabin. Ford also seized the moment. Sadat was clearly not Nasser and Ford recognized this. Peace with Egypt has been the cornerstone of US security in the region for almost half a century. At the time, Ford was called every name in the book for forcing the two sides to talk. History has completely vindicated him.

What is the most important thing for this president (or the next) do to improve the situation in the Middle East?

Kind of like entropy, complexity in the world is always increasing. Decision-makers need to do everything possible to slow things down, and development and diplomacy does just that. Military excursions accelerate the growth of complexity. For example, we have seen how bombing a country to get rid of a nuclear program creates a lot more complexity. Rather than a handful of large nuclear sites existing under IAEA surveillance, we may now have many more micro nuclear research sites across Iran with distributed fissile materials and centrifuges in hard to track areas. We need diplomacy to help with this situation that grows more and more complex by the day. The JCPOA was working to slow things down before it was effectively torn up.

We also need to arrest the complexity in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Policymakers have been saying for eighty years that this is just another local conflict that can safely be ignored. October 7th shattered that illusion. Actions undertaken on the Temple Mount could trigger unexpected reactions from within the Islamic world, not to mention from the other superpowers. When we start talking about disrupting the status quo at holy sites, things can get explosive very quickly. Similarly, the effects of mass starvation and the demolition of Gaza cannot be easily reversed and will have long-lasting repercussions. These images can ignite even more intense anger within the Islamic world. There is nothing to say Pakistan will not get more involved directly or indirectly in the region. Former CIA director Leon Panetta told me of his concern that a terrorist group could gain access to a nuclear device one day. He also said that Iran now has every incentive to get a nuke.

The US should stick to the basics. Use diplomacy to get Russia and China to control Iran's nuclear program. They have every incentive not to want more nukes in their backyard. Appeal to their national interests. Iran used to be an enemy of the Soviet Union and may well once again become an enemy of Russia.

My advice is—be a Gerald Ford. Force the Israelis and Palestinians to make a deal along the lines of what Olmert and Abbas (practically) agreed to. Make the deal sabotage proof—in other words, proactively build in safeguards if some group tries to use terrorism to inflame the other side—and flood the area with non-military development assistance. Let people see a stark before and after in their lives. Feed people. House people. Bind up the wounded. Be a Marshall. Be a Lincoln.