

The Road to Hell

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir

by **Samantha Power**

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At her first dinner with future president Barack Obama, a forty-five-minute meet and greet that turned into a four-hour mindmeld, the then senator from Illinois told Samantha Power he admired her first book, *A Problem from Hell*, an already classic study of genocide prevention. But, he added, it “seemed like malpractice to judge one’s prospects by one’s intentions, rather than making a strenuous effort to anticipate and weigh potential consequences.”

Power went on to serve as a National Security Council staffer for multilateral affairs and human rights during Obama’s first term. During his second, she became America’s ambassador to the United Nations. But her recently released memoir, *The Education of an Idealist*, reveals that she never learned her boss’s first lesson.

Power’s book has been lauded widely in the mainstream press and understandably so. For what it tries to achieve, it is close to pitch-perfect. It narrates an engrossing life story with a confessional and at times intimate rhetoric. It purports to explore how far ethical idealists can take the reins of

state power for the sake of good, and it concludes that they can do so with no compromises.

Power's memoir narrates her role in some policies that genuinely "made the world a better place," as one of the signature phrases of our times demands and the target audience for the book expects. Yet Power is not above acknowledging error and tragedy, notably when her convoy in Cameroon runs over a small boy and kills him. And Power's story vindicates the nobility of public service, especially for women. Indeed, it accurately reminds readers of continuing exclusions in the male foreign policy elite, even while affirming the feminist possibility of having it all—including the marital bliss and motherhood of two portrayed in recurring scenes. These vignettes, along with anecdotes about Power's always more than transactional relationship to her family's cook and nanny and her affection for various sports teams, effectively humanize her throughout the book. Yet at its core, *The Education of an Idealist* is a deft ethical dodge.

The overall thrust of Power's argument is to deny the need for any accounting of how good intentions can drive perverse results in the use of state power abroad. Only copping to forgivable or unintentional mistakes, it pushes back against the possibility of ethical compromise in crossing the Rubicon from government critic to government service. It succeeds in doing so, however, only because it studiously avoids serious discussion of how the wrong idealism in power can lead to the worst kind of unintended consequences.

Power's book has been a bestseller for months, but some will find the memoir falsely personal. It is in the genre that brings the reader up close to

life with all of its messiness, but often it feels more artificial than honest. In fact, *The Education of an Idealist* seems less a call for personal authenticity than a reminder of the need to manage a career down to the fine details and with greater concern for indulging friends and massaging enemies than for saying what you think. Most unbelievably, Power reports that she never meant to call Hillary Clinton a monster during Obama's first campaign for president, and in fact doesn't remember doing so. It just happened. In the narrative arc of the book, Power's career-interrupting indiscretion provides a moment of adversity from which a series of professional triumphs—and a kind of redemption through sin (if it was one)—are still possible.

On the political side, *The Education of an Idealist* narrates Power's ascent from atrocity journalist to steward of American exceptionalism, instructing followers not in the potential costs of difficult choices but in how to avoid even computing them. Intending to vindicate the ethics of changing the world from inside the belly of the beast without compromise, the problem is not that the book ignores the risk of sellout or self-delusion. It is worse, because it is about what happens when you think you can deploy American might for the sake of right, and you get your wish.

Sins of Omission

Born in Ireland, and a grateful immigrant who became a graduate of Yale College and Harvard Law School, Power emerged on the international stage as a young woman famed for her conscience. With its journalistic fluency and coruscating moral passion, her first book, *"A Problem from Hell"* (2002), established her brand as ethics in the notoriously amoral domain of foreign policy.

A response to her experience covering the harrowing Bosnian conflict (including the Srebrenica massacre) for American newspapers, Power's book became something of a generational bible. It provided an opening for humanizing international relations, if only America would step up. Having waited too long for a dilatory America to use military force to save victims from the Bosnian charnel house, Power insisted that the American syndrome was standing idly by—leaving an opening for idealists like her to goad America to act in the future.

In effect, "*A Problem from Hell*", which appeared in hawkish *New Republic* editor Martin Peretz's book series after other publishers passed on it, placed Power's own moment of rage in Bosnia within a long history. Her first book, she says, had its origins in Harvard professor Stanley Hoffmann's course on the use of force in international affairs, which started her thinking on a series of questions: "When is military force justified? How do the moral and religious traditions of nonviolence coexist with the moral imperative not to stand idly by in the face of suffering? How does one (particularly one who lacks sufficient information) measure the risks of action and inaction before deciding what to do? What would it mean if any country could take upon itself the decision to use force without any rules?"

All good questions, but already in her first book Power had forgotten some of them—especially why some countries rather than others get to break the rules and how much the hypothetical consequences of actions matter. Instead, Power identified an ethical priority for one country to act for humanity's sake, which swamped all other considerations in "*A Problem from Hell*". An exercise in historical mythmaking about the origins of the imperative of genocide prevention and a biting—if one-sided—critique of

American policy since the early twentieth century for insufficiently engaging in it, *“A Problem from Hell”* contained the seeds of much that was to come.

Power’s solely permissive approach to humanitarian intervention, and solely for American might, would survive into her time as Obama’s adviser, most notably when she drafted a memo for what he should say as a Nobel Peace Prize–winning wartime president. Power became a “stowaway” on his trip to Oslo and snuck into the acceptance speech a justification for armed humanitarian intervention in spite of the international law that prohibits it.

The worldview of Power’s book was dubious at the time, since it appeared precisely when harsh experience was forcing a reconsideration of the 1990s ethical millennialism that underwrote it. In particular, political theorist Stephen Holmes presciently identified three especially troublesome concerns when *“A Problem from Hell”* was published.¹

First, Power’s lament for American inaction occluded the many problems caused by American global force. In fact, at the very time Power was reporting during Bill Clinton’s presidency—and publishing as the Iraq war loomed during George W. Bush’s—American interventionism was not declining but rising. Emphasizing America’s historic quietism, as the predicate of inciting action, concealed the damage done by interventionism all along. “By denouncing the US primarily for standing idly by when atrocity abroad occurs,” Holmes wrote, Power “helped repopularize the idea of America as a potentially benign imperial power.” In depicting a syndrome of omission, Power concealed the long-standing realities of action.

Second, the desire for more humanitarian intervention led Power and like-minded liberals to be allergic to multilateralism and legalism, things she emotionally disdained in her book whenever they obstructed American power from doing its beneficent work. No wonder, Holmes could write in November 2002, with America already on the road to the Iraq War, that “having supported unilateralist intervention outside the UN framework during the 1990s, liberals and progressives are simply unable to make a credible case against Bush today.”

Power records in her memoir, accurately, that she opposed that war, but she does not reflect at all on why so few in her position could do so convincingly at the time—or why so many of her allies and fans became Bush’s “useful idiots,” as historian Tony Judt memorably called the liberal hawks of the day. “I was uncomfortable seeing my writing used in a way that might help justify a war,” she confesses of this period in her memoir. “*A Problem from Hell*”, which won the Pulitzer prize a few weeks after the Iraq intervention began, was “liable to misinterpretation,” she concedes. But that is not much different from saying that you didn’t mean for the loaded gun you left on the table to be used by someone else in the room. Lionizing unilateralism and illegality in a good cause turns out to be part of the problem when others prove to be devious or hoodwinked, even if you were not. After all, the whole reason for constraints on force—which include demands for multilateralism and legalism—is the risk of pretextual abuse and simple mistake.

Third, there is not just the danger of starting the wrong war but both the foreseeable and unpredictable risks of waging righteous ones. “*A Problem from Hell*” channeled what Max Weber called an “ethics of ultimate ends” to

privilege good intentions over careful and long-run caution about the futility, perversity, and jeopardy of passionate action. “Perhaps admirable in its original purpose,” Holmes concluded, such longing for goodness “sometimes mires America in local struggles that it cannot master, radically weakens the democratic oversight that a chronically parochial public can exercise over a secretive military operation, involves our own soldiers in savage acts, and undermines the country’s capacity to deliver some modest help to distressed peoples elsewhere in the world.” Even before anyone abused them as pretexts, humanitarian calls for American war often ignored the risk that such actions could make the world worse. These risks became reality not only in the Iraq war already in process but also as a result of later events that occurred under Power’s own watch.

Being Sorry for Being Sorry

In fairness, however, not long after Holmes’s triple warning, Power honorably revisited her priors, suspecting—however briefly—that she had helped to rationalize the use of American force that Bush was now abusing, likely with severe consequences, both intended and not. In a hard-hitting *New Republic* piece from March 2003, published only days before the Iraq War began in earnest, Power gave credible evidence of the education of an idealist herself, denouncing Bush’s “overreliance on power in the name of principle.”² It was easily the most important piece of writing in Power’s career, even though she would eventually disown it under pressure.

Anticipating an illegal and ruinous Iraq war, it was now far less obvious, Power concluded, that “the United States is structurally capable of using its tremendous power for the good of others.” Before it could really do so,

America would have to learn from the errors of hyperactivity—not simply of standing idly by—including “a historical reckoning with crimes committed, sponsored, or permitted by the United States.” “U.S. foreign policy has to be rethought. It needs not tweaking but overhauling,” Power went so far as to write, and “must cease its reliance on gratuitous unilateralism. . . . Embedding U.S. power in an international system and demonstrating humility would be painful, unnatural steps for any empire, never mind the most potent empire in the history of mankind.”

Education proved evanescent for Power, however. According to her memoir, this honest act of truth-telling left her not with a new mission in life but with a troublesome political quandary: in order to be confirmed as UN ambassador in July 2013, she now had to convince Senate Republicans that she did not hate the country she hoped to steer ethically. “America is the light to the world,” she told a hectoring Senator Marco Rubio, who read the inflammatory claims in the *New Republic* piece back to her before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Her new mantra was “I will not apologize for America.” Idealism now meant being sorry for being sorry.

Reliving the crucible of the confirmation process in her memoir, Power surmises that she had “lost her innocence.” But it is not clear what she means, especially since she begins the book denying that the acid bath of experience dissolves any ethical critique of power and forces conformity with it. Idealists, her argument goes, do not need to relinquish their faith. So one can only conclude that losing innocence in this case refers to Power’s abandonment of what was actually a crystalline moment of insight in order to revert to her hopes for America as a moral power, as if that were not the naïve but the sophisticated position.

What Power does not mention in her memoir is that, in response to Republican senator Ron Johnson at the same hearing, she also described the word “empire” as a term she had been mistaken to use. While America was certainly the most powerful country in world history, she explained on second thought, it is also “the most inspirational.” Recalling a hearing that mostly concerned complaints about Israel’s mistreatment in the United Nations, Power also does not mention that, in response to Senator Bob Corker, she endorsed American unilateralism outside the international body’s constraints. Ultimately, her appreciation of the downsides of the ethic of genocide prevention appeared to apply only to the case of Bush’s intervention in Iraq, not to her own good intentions elsewhere.

Learning Nothing and Forgetting Everything

By this point in her career, Power had not only forgotten what she might once have learned from the Iraq War, but had also refused to learn anything from her involvement in regime change in Libya. Power’s coverage of the 2011 Libya intervention—which was justified in the name of saving civilians from atrocity—provides everything there is to know about the ethic of armed humanitarian intervention, and about how to avoid staring its depressing realities in the face, even long after the fact.

When the Arab Spring spread to Libya in 2011, Power remembers in the memoir, she knew she was “not a Middle East expert.” But she also felt that her purpose in government was to question the conventional wisdom, which had tolerated autocracy in the region—or even propped it up—for years. “Fears about altering the status quo were credible,” she recalls, but then

“many of the arguments” of “regional specialists” had not been “stress-tested in decades.”

Narrating the dramatic meeting at which the choice for American intervention in Libya was made, Power begins by recalling her admission to Obama that little was verifiable about what Libyan dictator Moammar Qaddafi had done to civilians, and it was even less clear whether his talk of exterminating the resistance in the town of Benghazi—which rebels controlled—or his son’s promise of “rivers of blood” would come true. “Even if Qaddafi did not stage mass executions of the kind he had threatened, people connected to the opposition believed that they would be slaughtered if the city fell,” Power records. While she is probably right that fears of brutal execution caused armed insurgents to redouble their tenacity, she does not mention that they and their advocates also had their backs stiffened by the prospect of external intervention as long as atrocity loomed or was seen to be imminent.

Following the advice of Power and others, Obama fatefully arranged for a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing intervention and, under the auspices of the newfangled doctrine of “the responsibility to protect,” ordered offensive air strikes over the following days and months. “The United States had helped orchestrate the fastest and broadest international response to an impending human rights crisis in history,” Power still gloats.

It soon turned to ashes and made Libya worse, but Power essentially does not confront the longer-term outcome and barely mentions it. Astonishingly, *The Education of an Idealist* is entirely silent on why what

started out as a humanitarian intervention turned into a regime change in the first place. Who chose that outcome? Did it have to happen? Was it in the cards all along, and were humanitarians who signed up to justify it fooled, becoming someone else's useful idiots? Or could they have successfully rescued their cause from the more or less neoconservative outcome that followed? These are all critical questions, directly relevant to the plausibility of Power's idealism in practice. She doesn't even raise them.

Instead, Power performs outrage over being given too much credit for the intervention—along with fellow “Valkyries” Hillary Clinton and Susan Rice, as *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd famously called the “militaristic muses” who counseled force in Libya, in spite of objections from Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and others. (“We’ve come a long way from feminist international relations theory two decades ago that indulged in stereotypes about aggression being ‘male’ and conciliation being ‘female,’” Dowd remarked, with trademark snark.³) It is, of course, completely fair for Power to rebut any exaggeration of her responsibility. But it is indefensible for her to ignore the events that devastated her whole life's work, whatever her precise role. And it is remarkable that she simply sidesteps any knotty questions about the devastating consequences of exercising imperial might or how good intentions can suffer pretextual abuse by others. After all, these are questions that she once posed herself when criticizing a Republican president rather than serving a Democratic one.

But not only does Power skirt the entire mystery of “who said Qaddafi had to go,” which was reconstructed insightfully at the time by Hugh Roberts in the *London Review of Books*.⁴ When it comes to this improvident decision's

medium- and long-range consequences for Libya, Power is more avoidant than circumspect. “I hoped that Obama would not regret his decision,” Power recalls. But once again she does not address whether she was obligated to do more than hope that the consequences would not outrun her intentions. When a single Cameroonian boy dies inadvertently, seven cars back in her motorcade, Power says to herself, “over and over” in her mind: “First, do no harm. Do. No. Harm.” When a country descends into anarchy intentionally, however, she cannot muster the thought.

Power hints defensively at the catastrophe that came. “Assessments of President Obama’s actions in Libya often assume that, had he made a different set of choices and not intervened, Qaddafi could have returned the country to more or less the way it had functioned before,” she writes. But denying that things would have returned to the status quo ante, however plausibly, is nothing like reckoning with the enormous costs of American action for all concerned. Of a counterfactual scenario in which America didn’t act, Power insists, “No one can say with confidence what would have happened.” There was no “crystal ball.” It is a theory of forecasting opacity that makes ethics a shot in the dark, even if—a big if—intentions are good.

And that’s all there is. In two desultory pages, Power gestures at the horror later, complacently offering that “no amount of outside engagement . . . could have counteracted Libya’s centrifugal forces,” as if this fact were irrelevant to the very big outside engagement of regime change. She insists that Obama recognized not the mistake of his decision itself but the inadequacy of the planning for what came next, as if this did not mimic the rhetoric of those who once hoped to salvage the purity of conquering Iraq by scapegoating the proconsuls who misruled it. In spite of the

administration's best efforts, Power adds in an extraordinary deflection, the results were really Europe's fault for not taking "the lead" on "helping Libyans manage the aftermath." America's continuing engagement was simply overwhelmed by the fact that, as Power puts it inimitably in a footnote, "Libya's fissures had hardened."

"Everything is going fine," Chris Cook writes of the Libyan catastrophe in reviewing the recent memoir by British prime minister David Cameron, "and enjoys Cameron's firm leadership until the 16th page, when suddenly the verbs run passive as Libya descends into chaos over two pages."⁵

Diffusing responsibility in a similar way, Power actually says, "the post-Qaddafi political transition was . . . turning chaotic." It is hard to square this evasion with Power's confidence when she is explaining how idealism can survive in office, not merely shirking blame in an exercise in image management.

In fact, as many as 250,000 have died in Libya in the civil wars and disorders that followed the American and French choice for regime change.⁶ Russia, America's historic adversary, has backed forces in the ongoing tumult, and current reports suggest that Turkey is toying with its own intervention to counteract Russian meddling. Power still constantly refers to "ghastly" and "gruesome" catastrophes around the world that demand American action. But when it comes to this one that resulted from such intervention, she vacillates between euphemism and silence.

Astoundingly, in several later chapters about her time at the United Nations, when she was trying to organize aid for Syrian civilians devastated by an atrocious civil war, Power does not bother to mention the grim legacy of the

Libyan intervention for their very fate. China, in particular, certainly received an education in idealism along the way, which led it to join Russia in spoiling any attempt at the United Nations Security Council to respond to Syria.⁷ As a matter of fact, Obama himself hesitated to respond unilaterally too, devastatingly commenting after one of Power's entreaties for action in Syria that he had already read her book.⁸

But most revealing of her ethical reasoning is that, having banished any doubts about Libya, Power is far more willing to entertain questions about whether results could have been better in Syria if America had acted. She does not explain how that fits with her rejection a few pages before of counterfactual reasoning in a flagrant case in which America overcame inaction. Consequences matter, apparently, only when things might have gone better than they did when you failed to act—not when your action paved the road to ruin.

Power plausibly surmises that Obama was not a realist who felt bad about his realism, as David Remnick reported a staffer claiming.⁹ But if she is right, it is only because she fails to see her old boss as a case of educated idealism, who—like the Chinese—evolved in response to the Libyan mistake. Apparently, Power would have preferred that he simply ignore what he learned, as if the risks of gross error and unintended consequences were immaterial.

A Comfortable Idealism

At its core, *The Education of an Idealist* is little more than a retread of Power's old dreams of humanitarian intervention through American power. It is not

much different from a Marxist history of the Soviet Union that gestures obliquely at the gulag as a regrettable outcome. It just happened—or was somebody else's fault.

Power's memoir has nevertheless been a blockbuster in sales. And by design and execution, it has also secured Power's political viability for a future in which the right kind of Democrat to reappoint her prevails, or she enters electoral politics herself. Her case is a study, therefore, in the self-fashioning and self-representation of America's bipartisan elite, in foreign policy and beyond.

Power is probably right that there is little new to learn about ethical compromise from her book. Lord Acton taught that power corrupts; if Power was corrupted, it was no more (or less) than many others past or future. As long as ideas and actions are judged only by one's professed good intentions, an occasional double standard and a little dirt on one's hands come to be seen as tolerable along the way. Where the memoir fails is not in its defense of compromise but rather in how it treats the idealism of humanitarian military intervention, for which the compromises were made in the first place. It was and is merely one idealism among others, and it has proved implausible in theory and sinister in practice.

By framing the choice as one between hopeful idealism or pessimistic realism, Power never questions whether she chose the correct ethic in content (as if there were only one) or located a worthy agent to further it (as if America fit the bill). For Power and her implied audience, it goes without saying that genocide is an evil worth any cost to suppress, and that America exercising military supremacy in the name of humanity is good for the

world and the country. Darker forces and unintended outcomes are extraneous to these shimmering truths.

But it is precisely these notions that seem discredited by recent history, including Power's time in office. Among other things, Donald Trump has now assumed the role of truth-teller that Power adopted and then forsook. ("You think our country's so innocent?" he notoriously asked at one point.)

If *The Education of an Idealist* is exemplary of anything, it is so mainly in its avoidance of key questions that the coming of Trump has harshly raised regarding American policy in the future. With a charlatan in the White House, nostalgia for Barack Obama's presidency has been an attractive emotional state and a dependable marketing tactic. For those who refuse to look into how that presidency—and decades of mainstream policy—led America to its current situation, this is a comfortable stance. Power, alas, is very comfortable.

Notes

¹ Stephen Holmes, "Looking Away," *London Review of Books*, November 14, 2002.

² Samantha Power, "Force Full," *New Republic*, March 3, 2003.

³ Maureen Dowd, "Fight of the Valkyries," *New York Times*, March 22, 2011.

⁴ Hugh Roberts, "Who Said Gaddafi Had to Go?," *London Review of Books*, November 17, 2011.

⁶ The numbers are highly fluid, but see Nicolas J. S. Davies, “Calculating the Millions-High Death Toll of America’s Post-9/11 Wars,” *Mint Press News*, April 26, 2018.

⁷ See, e.g., Matt Schiavenza, “Why China Will Oppose Any Strike on Syria,” *Atlantic*, August 29, 2013.

⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *Atlantic*, January 2016.

⁹ David Remnick, “Watching the Eclipse,” *New Yorker*, August 2, 2014.

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