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THE DELUSIONS OF
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY
FROM KOREA TO AFGHANISTAN

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I don't believe in magic.

J. K. ROWLING  

INTRODUCTION

FOR A LIFETIME, AMERICA HAS STUMBLED AND STUMBLED AGAIN in its political and military dealings with the rest of the world. We have found ourselves entangled in Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and, from 1950 to 1953, with China on the frozen Korean Peninsula—these being just the worst moments of miscalculation. To pick at random, other letdowns include illusory arms control deals with Soviet Russia rather than demonstrable limitations on weaponry; “nation-building” in places where nations have never existed; attempts off and on to fine-tune, just for starters, the futures of Iran and Pakistan; and faddish intellectual obsessions with counterinsurgency or nuclear terrorism that burst forth in one decade, as they did respectively in the 1960s and ‘70s, only to lie in oblivion for thirty years, then undergo frantic resurrection at one more surge of “crisis.”

Two great accomplishments happily offset this unnerving record: the ultimate defeat of the Soviet empire and the triumphant creation of a global web of trade that boosts the lives of billions of people.

These profound successes are nonetheless surrounded by a host of dangerous self-deceptions that I sum up as magical thinking. I call it “magical” because shrewd, levelheaded people are so frequently bewitched into substituting passion, sloganeering, and haste for reflection, homework, and reasonable objectives. Goodness knows that American energy and excitement have combined to cause financial boom-bubble-busts at home for some 250 years. But magical notions are much less apparent in the pragmatic ways that America goes about its domestic affairs. America would not generate unsurpassed enterprise, still be the richest nation, or now lead software and biotech innovation if the geopolitical frame of mind permeated Silicon Valley, Walmart, or the heartland’s equally cutting-edge agribusinesses.

When we think magically, we expect to produce astounding outcomes of our own design. This element of taken-for-granted power is what distinguishes magical thought from mere wishful thinking. In wishful thinking, we believe that what we wish for is actually true. We interpret events as we would like them to be, as opposed to what they really are. But the magical perspective convinces those who hold it that gigantic desires can be brought to fruition in the snap of an American election cycle—to “transform the Middle East and the broader world of Islam politically,”
or to crush the Viet Cong. There's nothing misty-eyed about this determined, solipsistic temperament. That degree of willfulness is also what distinguishes magic from religion, in which we implore the divine to intervene. At worship, we seek to deserve the favor of supernatural might. In the grip of magical belief, we position ourselves at the center of profound events and believe that such vast, apparently worthwhile objectives must be fulfilled out of their sheer righteousness.

Magical thinking entails seductive, familiarizing rituals. In the excitements of global policy, we court some truly grim entities as imaginary friends, such as venal client states that eventually implode and splatter us in their collapse. We put our faith in silver bullets like the Superfortress bombers confidently relied on to deliver victory in North Korea, and onward to the assault helicopters of Vietnam and today's Predator drones in Afghanistan. We resort to bad analogies and inferior quantitative techniques while stilling our doubts with mantras of “stability” and “democracy” accompanied by the usual creepy euphemisms like “collateral damage,” “enhanced interrogation,” or percentage of “DOE,” meaning “Death on Earth.” When outcomes do not match expectations, as has been all too often the case, it is magically assumed that it was the particulars that were gotten wrong, not that the overall objective was misconceived. We misphrased the wish or bungled the follow-through: someone tripped in the war dance. How could the original proposition not have been sound? Therefore new shibboleths arise, as we repeat with a revived certainty that—next time—America will get things right.

Hubris draws on magical certainty, or indeed may derive from it. In either case, many men and women in power keep fueling hopes with unreason and calling it analysis. Magic entails illusion, whether on the stage or in National Security Council meetings where good minds prove that one's intelligence is no better than the assumptions it works from. When uncomfortable evidence is waved aside, illusion passes into delusion—and it's then that willfulness becomes deadly. Throughout, when we think magically, we believe that our desires override those of anyone else, peasant warriors in Asia and Kremlin apparatchiks alike.

Magical thinking simplifies. It fills in for ignorance and substitutes for critical, distanced consideration. Intricate alien phenomena are set up as more or less of one piece, like “communism” or “terrorism.” It becomes the epitome of magic to believe that the most complex of aims can be realized on our terms among people whose languages we don't speak, whose histories we don't know, and whose interests we have not fathomed. Yet surely if we believe with enough resolve that we'll make something happen, it will. To believe that this country can accomplish whatever it sets its mind to is reasonable enough in business, science, and social change. That's much less so as we advance into faraway places about which we not only know little, but hardly bother to understand.

Magical thinking is rooted in a deep mulch of culture, misused legend, and misapplied experience. All countries draw on their own forms of it. Myths have conquered logic for millennia of hopes and alarms. But since America is the superpower, its illusions are more consequential. They are also particularly robust, stemming as they do from the country's dream-driven origins of being a City on a Hill, its unparalleled achievements of constitutional government as well as industry, and the ever-richer diversity of its people.

Of course, America doesn't inevitably succumb to the latest waft of magic when it faces challenges abroad. If it did, it wouldn't be the supreme power, securing the seas for global commerce and serving as the ultimate guarantor against threats to international order, as in the Persian Gulf War, when the country responded to Saddam Hussein's conquest of Kuwait. And there are other salutary examples of American strength wisely applied. The point remains, however, that a willingness to don magical lenses usually arises once excitement, peril, and ignorance combine. Magical thinking builds up in the time between disillusionments: initially, there's a fantastic sense
of possibility, as when the obligation took hold to “liberate” North Korea on the doorstep of Mao’s China. Then a bewildered reckoning follows. Before long, however, the country gathers itself for another death-defying leap, as in Vietnam a dozen years later, and so it goes.

Magical notions get injected into U.S. decision making with an ease rarely found in other advanced democracies. In part, that’s because of the political appointments system on which America relies to staff its government. The White House has the responsibility to fill eight thousand or so senior jobs throughout the federal departments and agencies. The result is a kaleidoscope of new arrivals and random talents. The effectiveness of the country’s professional civil service as well as of its Foreign Service is diminished. In addition, the boisterous spontaneity of the decision-making process of a continental republic—with its passionate advocacy groups, endlessly recombining coalitions, and opposing branches of government—creates lots of opportunity for focused, forceful people to weigh in with burning agendas.

This union of fresh high spirits and amateur overexcitement leaves the door open to a certain type of enthusiast—whether from government, academia, the press, or think tanks—whom I call the “Emergency Man.” Such are the clever, energetic, self-assured, well-schooled people who take advantage of the opportunities intrinsic to the American political system to trifle with enormous risk. They are drawn to the national security policy arena by its atmosphere of decisiveness, secrecy, and apocalyptic stakes. A particular civilian temperament finds wrestling with decisions about fleets, Delta Force, Stryker Brigades, Moscow summitry, and regional crises a lot more exciting than the dreary disputes surrounding Amtrak or tackling African poverty.

Of course, emergency men show up in the ministries of other nations. In France, professionals at the Quai d’Orsay mutter that their boss, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, is so “in love with crisis” that he openly neglects the subjects that bore him, such as the European Union. But, for better or worse, France—like Britain, Japan, Brazil, Germany, China—has a more constricted decision-making system, as well as intellectually impressive and usually dispassionate civil servants on the scene to lower the heat. There are strengths and weaknesses to both approaches. But the American one is well primed to inject the nation’s love of the bold, optimistic, and grand into the mix.

Emergency men come in different flavors, from the “neocons” of recent years to the “the best and the brightest” national security cadre—as that remarkable observer of the American scene, David Halberstam, forever stamped them—of the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies, determined to bring Hanoi to its knees. (And it is chilling to now to hear the media call the latest arrivals in Washington, without irony, “the best and the brightest.”) Emergency men can be found among the “daring amateurs” of the early 1950s, conspicuous in the CIA. Some were on the staff of General Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of U.S. and UN forces during the fateful first ten months of the Korean War, and were to be found as well among his admirers on Capitol Hill. They have been repeatedly on hand to fire up resolve against perils that, to them, have never been greater than at that very moment.

Emergency men furnish an endless stream of answers, usually before the penetrating questions have been asked. They radiate an aura of intensity, though their demeanor may be cool. They are united by an uncanny ability to amplify the drama of the moment. In the run-up to war and in debates over the nation’s deepest interests, their demands for swift, vigorous action stand in for command of detail, whether of terrain, precedent, or the alleged support of allies. Oftentimes what seems the unassailably clear-cut moral quality of their convictions persuades many more of us, beyond that small part of the citizenry professionally concerned with foreign affairs, to unite behind their certainties.

How does this habit of ill judgment sustain itself, and where does its supply of bad ideas keep
coming from? Why do they haunt us decade in and decade out? Why are patriotic, capable people in lofty office—as well as opinion leaders in universities, think tanks, and the press—entranced by the prospect of high-stakes action and by half-baked theories that are pretty well discredited even before the start? How does so much talent and spirit get co-opted from Main Street? How might the right discerning skepticisms be induced instead? How can we call on our better angels and apply the country’s unmatched strengths to its own enlightened self-interest?

We can go a long way to answering those questions by exploring the six compelling illusions that typically are in play when the country lunges in dangerous directions that it never intended to go. The faces of our country’s friends and foes may change over the years, as do the modes of war or parley, but the paths of folly are remarkably consistent and the language of crisis is rather unoriginal.

By dismantling the pattern of magical thought, and examining each strand of illusion, we get a sharper understanding than what has been offered to date as to how Americans imagine, confront, live with, and, sometimes, invite danger.

The individual strands are:

1. A sensation of urgency and of “crisis” that accompanies the belief that most any resolute action is superior to restraint; it’s a demeanor that’s joined by the emergency man’s eagerness to be his country’s revealer of dangers, real and imaginary.

2. The faith that American-style business management—as practiced in Silicon Valley startups soon to join NASDAQ or, not long ago, at the River Rouge plant in Dearborn or at steel mills along the Monongahela—can fix any global problem given enough time, resources, and appropriately “can-do,” businesslike zeal.

3. A distinctively American desire to fall in behind celebrities, stars, and peddlers of some newly distilled expertise who, in foreign affairs especially, seem to glow with wizardry—and whom we turn to for guidance while believing, for a fatefulty long moment, that they only have to wave their wands for success to fall from the sky.

4. An expectation of wondrous returns on investment, even when this is based on intellectual shortcuts—in fact on lack of seriousness and mental flexibility, as described, for instance, in trenchant analyses of the Iraq War—though the same shortcuts were apparent in Vietnam and North Korea, as well as in many politico-military efforts in between.

5. Conjuring powerful, but simplified, images from the depths of “history” to rationalize huge and amorphously expanding objectives, a technique of foreign policy artistry resorted to by high officials, professors, and field commanders alike.

6. The repeated belief that America can shape the destiny of other countries overnight and that the hearts and minds of distant people are throbbing to be transformed into something akin to the way we see ourselves.

What has not been done before this book is to pull together these vexing compulsions in order to explain why we keep acting on them—and how to get out of them. To that end, the first chapter lays the groundwork, such as how the peculiar types of threat that America has confronted since 1945 have affected our perceptions of the world. Thereafter each strand of the pattern has its chapter. Each of those six chapters opens with a vignette that illustrates the particular illusion being addressed, followed by the key questions to be answered. Portraits of the emergency men who embody the specific problem being discussed are also included. Significant events of past
decades then appear in a very different light.

By story’s end, we should have discovered how to make our way around these strange temptations and will have come to understand how the country can truly play to its strengths. We’ll recognize that America’s promise is also to be found in its faults—knowing that our country’s greatest gift is that of endless re-creation.

1. SOURCES OF MAGIC

RALPH WALDO EMERSON CALLED OURS “THE COUNTRY OF tomorrow” because of our astounding ability to turn dreams into reality. Whether the issue at hand has been settling the continent within a nineteenth-century lifetime, the wearing down of Soviet tyranny, or assimilating the latest wave of immigrants, America has advanced confidently into the future, pressing its visions to completion.

Consider Franklin Roosevelt’s vision at the outset of World War II. Within a month of America’s entry into the greatest of wars, he pledged to double the 1942 production of tanks and planes, and then to double it again. This goal made no sense to the British, who had been fighting for more than two years and whose booming steelworks were fully mobilized. Visiting Washington in 1941, the great economist John Maynard Keynes had smiled politely at the young American planners. Like some tough-minded U.S. industrialists, he would not find Roosevelt’s vision reasonable. Yet production roughly kept tripling. FDR had no empirical basis to expect this achievement. But he had a rational sense of possibility and intimately understood his country and its people. He knew that U.S. manufacturing genius had been stalled by the 1930s Great Depression; this challenge offered a cause perfectly suited to American energy, speed, and enterprise.

Forty years later, Ronald Reagan understood that the Soviet Union was dying—so long as America helped with the euthanasia. No other national leader held this belief, nor did the CIA or most any foreign policy expert. He was an inheritor of both FDR’s optimistic intuition and his self-efficacy, as well as of his insouciance—FDR having remarked that most of what he knew about the world came from his stamp collection. Reagan was the first postwar president to take the offensive against the Soviet Union across each mode of power: political, ideological, economic, and military. And when the decades-long contest was just about over, in the spring of 1988, he walked the streets of Moscow through crowds chanting, “U.S.A! U.S.A!” At a time when extremely few politicians, professors, or CEOs understood the significance of twenty-first-century information technologies, he held up a microchip to students at Moscow State University as a symbol of freedom’s power and material abundance; and when asked about the “evil” he had denounced only five years before, he cheerfully replied, “That was another time, another place.”

A vision, after all, is not magical just because every bit of previous experience and prevailing wisdom says that it is impossible. A vision only passes into magic when it has to overcome difficulty by pure assertion, or by self-hypnosis, when we refuse to accept that more than a few of our high aspirations are unlikely to be pulled off. But those shortcomings have by and large been standard procedure if we consider the deadly reversals of Iraq, Vietnam, and North Korea—and the many ancillary attempts to fine-tune the world. U.S. practice has frequently been like the Gary Larson cartoon showing a couple of scientists contemplating a blackboard that bears two series of equations wistfully linked by “Then a Miracle Occurs.” Miracles would have had to happen for the hypotheses that generate a lot of this activity to prove out.

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First, some background before distinguishing the specific strands of illusion: How does magical thinking reveal itself in U.S. foreign and defense policy? What are the unique influences in American public life—particularly the approach to recruiting for high office—that open gateways
to such intense willful dreaming? How does “Cold War” followed by what the Pentagon originally styled the “Long War” against terror shape our perceptions of the world? And how did magic begin to grip the public imagination so early in our post–World War II journey?

Foreign affairs by its nature is imbued with a mystique on the edge of magic: the secret dispatches, the untouchable sacredness of ambassadors, conclaves of wise men ruminating on Armageddon, the “3 A.M. phone call” to the White House that heralds the next hinge moment of history. President Kennedy called thrillingly on Americans to “dream of things that never were”—as his brother Robert would put it, quoting Shaw—whether men on the moon or, for that matter, U.S. health-care reform. But mingled with these visions of human advance were geopolitical fantasies of “America’s frontiers . . . [being] on the . . . Mekong and the Tigris and the Euphrates.”

Under the spell of one kind of magic, “friendly” dictators are believed to share our ideals. If they’re not democrats, they have democracy in their souls. In the 1970s, at the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas in Panama, the United States trained one of the most brutal of Latin America’s officer corps, the instruments of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. Because the modern U.S. military is the armed force of a democracy, it was somehow taken for granted that modernizing Nicaragua’s armed forces would democratize them. Yet murder and world-class embezzlement continued energetically in that country. During the 1960s, as the Kennedy administration expanded internal security funding and training to some of the world’s grossest violators of human rights, several members of the Shah of Iran’s notorious SAVAK gestapo were embedded in the Kansas City Police Department. The Shah was fond of speaking about his affinity with the West; therefore the State Department’s new Office of Public Safety believed midwestern values as well as constabulary teachings would rub off on his “policemen.”

Practically by definition, magic is invoked to get us there fast. The lantern is rubbed, out swooshes the genie, and wish fulfillments rain down. So a defense secretary eager to flex additional U.S. muscle against “terror” can convince himself that so Herculean a task as taking over the Arab world’s most populous oil-producing state will last “six days, six weeks”—at worst “six months”—before a satisfying departure. Or so Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld promised U.S. troops a month before invading Iraq.

That hopeful half-year timeline keeps popping up. America intended to reconstruct North Korea and meld it with South Korea in the half-year over autumn 1950–spring 1951; and that was going to be the time needed, said General Paul Harkins, U.S. commander in Vietnam, to flatten the Viet Cong, “by Christmas” of 1963. “Six months” is the same critical duration that the New York Times’ columnist Tom Friedman has offered, on a dozen occasions since 2003, to determine whether the United States has built democracy in Iraq. And, judging from precedent, just “six months more,” or so, will be heard from the White House in 2011, the year which President Obama has anticipated that U.S. soldiers can start to leave Afghanistan.
In Korea, in Vietnam, and on to the Tigris and Euphrates, the problem has not just been one of underestimating an enemy. Everyone has done that at least since Thermopylae. The problem is that the magical thinker has marched confidently forward, and complexity has been trampled out of sight. A great deal can be random in the “game of nations,” a term coined by famed CIA operative Miles Copeland to catch the amorality of power politics. Luck and happenstance play their roles. The way forward can be obscure. But the magical thinker proceeds with the valor of ignorance, compounding the chances of disappointment.

To that end, former secretary of defense Robert McNamara had to confess with authentic contrition, long after the Vietnam War was lost, that neither he nor others in President Kennedy’s national security cohort had “truly investigated what was essentially at stake” in Indochina. The national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, was even vague as to how the beleaguered Republic of Vietnam had come into being. Bundy’s successor forty years later, Condoleezza Rice, would explain with surprising lack of embarrassment that, with the White House knowing so little about Afghanistan, officials on September 11, 2001, raced to the map to find out where this threatening country might be. Nonetheless, the magical thinker takes far-reaching action, barely inhibited by weighing the risks or well-argued alternatives.

Even basic arithmetic gets overridden. China, for example, has long been the most populous nation in the world, with limitless reserves of infantry; the U.S. Army, however, kept pressing deeper in 1950 through the eight-thousand-foot mountains and river gorges of North Korea onto that great country’s very doorstep. It was matchless ground for history’s biggest ambush. Or, midway in the Vietnam War, General Harkins’s successor, William Westmoreland, adopted a strategy of “attrition”: conscripts from Hartford, Tempe, and Macon were thrown against an opponent who had been fighting inexhaustibly on his own terrain for nearly twenty years. Commanders deluded themselves with “body counts”—statistical scorecards with minimal concern as to whether the Vietnamese bodies being counted were the enemy’s—to show victory at hand.

Six months into Iraq and with no exit in sight, Mr. Rumsfeld asked his staff, “Are we capturing, killing or deterring more terrorists every day than the madrassah and the radical clerics are recruiting?” only to turn away from the worrying reply. To be master of the answer before you have asked the question, ready to “stay the course” no matter what you hear, is the mark of the self-deceiver, not the public servant.

Magical thinking, in addition to trampling down complexity and mythologizing efforts “to stay the course,” nourishes false connections that entangle themselves with our best-intentioned quests. America opposes “evil,” and thus the “Axis” of World War II is drafted into the ritual analogy-making: Terror is the moment’s paramount form of evil; Saddam, unambiguously evil, consequently has “a long-standing relationship” with Al Qaeda, as said Mr. Cheney. No matter that on the issue of radical Islamic terror Saddam was closer to our side than to theirs—hated by Al Qaeda not as a tyrant but as a secularist enemy of Islam. The Vietnam War had its own basic false connection: Chairman Mao’s China was communist; communism is expansionist; so all of Vietnam, its neighbor to the south, would soon be swallowed. It didn’t matter that Vietnam had successfully fought the Middle Kingdom for centuries, as it would again four years after America left.

Reasonable objectives disappear under magical thinking. Resistance to one assault on a relatively well-defined U.S. interest, such as protecting South Vietnam from the communist North, or hunting down Al Qaeda, finds itself conflated into an overarching plan of action to put down all apparently connected problems—“containing China,” say, in the 1960s or “ending tyranny in our world” after 9/11.
The most dangerous of illusions is to believe that we are working under no illusions at all. The
homework has been done. Options have been weighed. Precedents have been considered,
intelligence assessed. And it's reassuring when the White House lets it be known, as in 1962, that
Barbara Tuchman's The Guns of August, about how Europe's great powers stumbled into World
War I, has been required reading in the family quarters. But such study didn't prevent President
Kennedy from taking decisions that sped us into the swamps of Vietnam. Assurances of prudent
reflection were similarly pressed on the citizenry when a spokesman insisted that Camus' The
Stranger, which depicts a world more chillingly other than we can imagine, was being pondered
on George W. Bush's Crawford, Texas, ranch. But fixed thinking tends to stay fixed under the thrall
of magic—at least dangerously long enough to remake the world in ways entirely different from
those intended.

Whether illusion or delusion, magical thinking colors both perceptions. Illusions at least are tamer.
It was an illusion when the Defense Department's deputy secretary assumed in 2002 that any
differences between Iraq's Sunni and Shia were surely “exaggerated”; it passed into delusion when
the carnage stoked by religious, economic, and political hatred was brushed off as the last efforts
of “dead-enders” and “thugs.”11

Fortunately, America's most formidable rivals keep entertaining their own fantastical scenarios.
When we pay attention, those can be used to our advantage.

“I thought I would issue a few proclamations,” reminisced Leon Trotsky, commissar of foreign
affairs after 1917's Bolshevik seizure of power, “and shut up shop.” Workers of the world would
unite. They didn't. Full of delusions about the truth of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union carried
its brutal, irrational, collectivist economic doctrines right into the colossally dispersed information
age of Microsoft, Oracle, and Dell.

Russia's belief in the fitness of arbitrary authority endures today. That is its own version of magical
thought, and one that rationalizes corruption of anything that the powerful want to touch, whether
stifling the press or using Gazprom as the Kremlin's cash cow. China, for its part, is a land with a
terrifying record of magical notions. They span two millennia from the Burning of the Books to the
Boxer rebels' faith that Western bullets would melt into water against their chests, and then on to
the insanities of Maoism, in which “scientific socialism” legitimized endless hocus-pocuses—infant
piglets expected to spawn litters, broken glass used to fertilize crops. It's a worrying record as that
giant swells into the next candidate for superpower status. In any event, we can hardly count on an
opponent's self-deceptions to keep offsetting our own.

All nations and peoples have their magical beliefs. Magical thinking has often blinded Britain to
the fact that each phase of the ongoing Industrial Revolution has ratcheted down its power. France
appears to dwell on past greatness, evoked by centuries of subtle diplomacy or memories of
empire, to claim a unique understanding of the present world. Notoriously, the Germans long
believed themselves to be justly vengeful victims of less civilized powers, as in the 1920s and,
climactically, in 1939 when an unappeasable tyrant cried “retribution” to expand his Thousand
Year Reich.

For America to have an abundance of magical beliefs might seem odd for so pragmatically
commercial a culture. But consider how Americans nonetheless contemplate risk at home. The
country's spasms of boom-bubble-bust offer telling implications. No other great nation has so
consistently exposed itself to market turmoil, from canals in Andrew Jackson's day to subprime in
those of Goldman Sachs. This desire for miraculous payoffs has gripped us at least since the
American Revolution. And these private intensities work their way into America's gravest
international undertakings. In the euphorias and letdowns can be seen an affinity for carrying the
truly possible to the point of calamity. We believe that we can shirk elementary due diligence or,
overseas, offhandedly squelch our very real opponents. The Iraq War itself, observes Richard Haass, who when it began headed the State Department’s policy planning office, “was equivalent to investing $100,000 and thinking you’ll make a million.” We build an outsized confidence in how our friends will assist us, only to plunge, when our hopes in Saigon or Kabul are dashed, into irrational despair. Plus there’s a sourly applicable truth about bubbles: smart people who’ve learned about them the hard way nonetheless line up for the next one.

The many appointments that the White House disburses are not just cabinet secretaries and ambassadorial postings but all the deputy secretaries, undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, deputy assistant secretaries, associate deputy undersecretaries, office directorships, and other senior positions at State and Defense, on the NSC staff and at Treasury, as well as through most of the executive branch. The CIA and other parts of the intelligence community—as America’s sixteen distinct organizations responsible for this function are called—have relatively few appointees. Yet for other reasons that we will see, they too have no shortage of self-deception.

There is nothing like this system in any other advanced democracy. For better or worse, the ministries are filled by permanent, though frequently rotating, career officials; those mandarins hold important roles sometime effectively up to cabinet level. In Britain and France, the civil service is an elite calling. In America, however, even the Foreign Service is weakly positioned, its carefully sieved career officers often cast as upper-servant types in flight from the competitive economy that rages outside the politesses of diplomacy.

There’s no harm in the fact that, since the Kennedy administration, around a third of U.S. ambassadorships have usually gone to political appointees, a practice routinely denounced by America’s professional diplomats. Some political appointees, such as President Obama’s ambassador to Japan—a Silicon Valley high-tech lawyer with a career of trans-Pacific deals—can be a better fit than a Foreign Service officer or a policy generalist from academia. However, what can become significant as a source of magical thought is our method of filling decision-making slots in Washington itself beneath the cabinet level.

Peter Rodman advanced one of the most ringing endorsements of the status quo in his penetrating analysis, Presidential Command. A Harvard-trained lawyer too restlessly imaginative ever to practice, he became an admired career noncareerist who, for nearly forty years, alternated between think tanks and government, working effectively in appointive office at the NSC, as director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, and finally serving from 2001 to 2007 as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs.

Rodman argued that a president most effectively exercises power by personalizing the instruments of state right down to the level of daily execution. In a system that depends heavily on the qualities of the one person in charge, the chief executive can only succeed, particularly in international policy, by assuring authoritative political direction over the departments. How else to make his hopefully clear-minded perceptions felt? Strong appointees loyal to his beliefs then work to fulfill his vision, perhaps compensating for his own executive inexperience. The alternative, it is feared, is that White House policies might be stymied by, say, a State Department that the Kennedy White House believed lacked “energy” or that President Nixon and Henry Kissinger found “disloyal,” or that today, Rodman has written, “can rarely ever bring itself to admit that diplomacy is not working.”

As the line of reasoning goes, professional public servants—not just at State but also at Langley and even the Pentagon—are similarly beset by bureaucratic inertia, at best.

Yet to every victorious administration belong the legitimate spoils of government. An advantage of this practice is to pull into the system dynamic public-spirited people like Rodman who have the
authority and the appetite to act on bold initiatives—in contrast, say, to the jaded career mandarins who inhabit European foreign ministries. When it succeeds, a valuable tension exists between the more original, articulate, and generally better-educated appointees, intensely alert to the short term, and an ongoing inherited staff that concentrates on longer challenges. Politically connected outsiders act as catalysts and innovators to turbocharge the process while not getting bogged down by repetition and past disillusions. In such a system, bright but relatively uninformed people interact intensely with informed but not cutting-edge ones. The results can be either creative tumult or administrative hell.

This diverse, multifaceted, adrenaline-charged method of policymaking, found only in America, can resemble a reverberatory furnace. Temperatures rise as Pentagon assistant secretaries, NSC directors, and unnamed senior officials at State alternately team up or joust with each other as well as with advocacy groups, think-tankers, policy consultants, entrepreneurial professors, and significant legislative assistants on the Hill. Lobbyists for foreign governments move back and forth to advise presidents and defense secretaries about their for now shrugged-off clients. Journalists abet this process and occasionally take high office themselves. It can even be difficult to tell who’s “in” and who’s “out.”

America’s freewheeling mode of policymaking, particularly in foreign affairs, also blurs lines of responsibility between branches of government and between government and the public. “Outsiders” can fast become “insiders,” given enough passion and resources. Coalitions within the bureaucracy, as on Capitol Hill, can quickly be formed or pulled apart by shrewd players—Senate staffers, midlevel civil servants, citizen activists, legislators themselves as well as appointees—who know the policy process. Unusual benefits can flow.

For instance, George Crile’s sardonic chronicle Charlie Wilson’s War details the bureaucratic fights and citizen influences that secretly steered about $5 billion to the Afghan mujahideen’s resistance to the Red Army in the 1980s. In this instance, a few political appointees worked closely with several farsighted career people to inflict a crippling wound on Soviet aggression. A fixated, Scotch-guzzling, hedonist Democratic congressman spontaneously gathered allies among committee staffers, political angels, and a maverick clandestine services officer at CIA to short-circuit entrenched resistance in State, at Langley, and among the Joint Chiefs.

And Wilson’s exploit, with its mix of career officials and appointees, is not unique. It is matched by equally dramatic sagas still untold—as when midlevel political appointees in the Nixon, Ford, and Carter years took it upon themselves, entirely outside official channels, to collaborate with keen, truly expert insiders to obstruct the biggest-ever Soviet espionage setup in America. The CIA had refused point-blank to believe that such a masterpiece of thievery existed, and the FBI, never having counterintelligence as a priority, showed minimal interest. These twenty men and women instead went to informants in U.S. high-tech companies, buttonholed key congressmen, got pointers from the National Security Agency’s wealth of electronic intercepts, and deployed back-channel leaks from Helene Boatner, then an officer in the CIA’s operations center and later the founder of its Office of Leadership Analysis. Vital time was bought against further Soviet penetration for about five critical years until the evidence became undeniable to all concerned. Then, of course, every part of the national security apparatus lunged forward, desperate to be part of the sub-rosa blocking and tackling.14

One drawback of a system that depends so heavily on political appointees, however, is that these men and women know they must act right now before being swept out of office. Filled with the rightness of whatever their cause may be, they push their targeted, cogently argued priorities through bureaucracies less certain or obsessed. And they do so quickly, before rival approaches are brought to the table. Dreadful ideas can ricochet through the corridors of power more easily in the absence of intellectually demanding career officials who are permanently in place to argue
and, if necessary, to push courteously back.

Institutional memory becomes spotty as appointees from an earlier administration vanish after elections and as their successors serve for two or three years, then to return to law firms, lobbying shops, corporations, or academia—leveraging public service as new clients, contracts, and center directorships arrive.

This form of (un)-planned obsolescence encourages “crises” to be hurried forward, only to fade under the tinctures of time, perhaps to reassert themselves in new guises. Since few appointees combine both the durability in government and the continuously fresh-eyed acuteness of the late Peter Rodman, the decision-making system is tilted steadily against weary career functionaries who try to explain that the “crisis du jour”—a cautionary term favored by Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, savvy national security adviser to both Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush—might just be the eleventh iteration of a more or less similar commotion.

The White House Office of Presidential Personnel further randomizes the deployment of top talent. WHOPP is likely to be in the hands of the latest true believers. They may not always be the sons and daughters of political donors, but usually they're former campaign workers and people well connected through congressmen or other party nabobs. Thomas Schweich, a smart, politically active attorney who entered the George W. Bush administration as a deputy assistant secretary of state and who would serve as chief of staff at the U.S. mission to the United Nations, recalls how his own appointment was “preceded by an effort by a 20-something in personnel to place an unqualified friend in the job.” “You know you have arrived when you get interviewed by the 29-year-old instead of the 22-year-old,” a Foreign Service Officer and three-time ambassador chuckled to Schweich after having been grilled in 2005 for another top post at the State Department. 15

And this type of randomness occurs in every administration.

Party affiliation may prove insignificant, provided one is of the right faction. Neocon Democrats in quantity proved useful to the last Republican presidency, and being a registered Republican—or an independent like Secretary of Defense Robert Gates—is itself no barrier to appointments under the Obama presidency. Once basic thresholds of qualifications are crossed, friends recruit friends or people they may have worked with in an earlier administration. The snag, besides the subjective assessment of appointees, is that the world is changing at an order of magnitude faster than are the thoughtful reflections of one's associates. Meanwhile, layered patronage networks accrete over the decades with catastrophic results.

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Other influences in American life besides the political system make the country prone to passionate, simplifying foreign policy decisions. These include such deep-rooted characteristics as America's tempo of change, its eagerness to embrace the new, and a moralism that has taken many forms and motivations. These will be discussed later in the story. But magical thinking is also shaped by recent historical experience. Three key influences stand out over the last two generations.

One is the type of overarching global conflicts that America has faced almost continuously since 1945—the Cold War, which ended in 1991, and the response to transnational terror that began in earnest in fall 2001. By their nature, open-ended conflicts offer dangerous, diversionary enchantments. In an all-out war for survival, as much of the world experienced during 1940–45, governments are compelled to call in the most competent people to wage them. Everything is at stake and time is short. A nation submits itself to a stern, self-imposed audit of institutional focus
and individual merit. In World War II, America went flat out—maximizing production, in which the country’s genius is unrivaled. The graver the issue, moreover, the faster it passes into the hands of those who command the highest trust; Franklin Roosevelt’s firmly Republican secretary of war, Henry Stimson, is a good example.

But in the ongoing, murkier struggles that have since gnawed at America, the country works itself into predicaments much less suited to its talents. Passionate agendas and mammoth objectives at best tangential to its vital concerns deflect attention. A lot more tough questions come to rest on opinions about what should and shouldn’t be proper responses. These open-ended conflicts are easily seized on by moralists and ideologues, all the more so given the U.S. political system. In practice, this foments the illusion that problems are black or white. Specific national interests get obscured. Secondary urgencies are rationalized by third-rate arguments.

America then finds itself at war in places and with people that have little to do with the country’s primary opponent. So in 1950–53 we’re fighting China in North Korea while the Soviet Union throws in money, munitions, and, behind the scenes, pilots, gunners, and technicians. The following decade we’re at war with North Vietnam, while this time both China and the Soviet Union sit back to serve as arsenals of tyranny. Or, as in fighting Al Qaeda yet invading Iraq, we end up in combat against the real opponent’s own enemies, who we’ve convinced ourselves are his accomplices—while leaving behind a “token” U.S. force in Afghanistan.

*AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ* are the latest in a string of blunders that includes Vietnam and an unintended war with China from 1950 to &lt;#x2019;53, those four fiascoes being just the worst moments in nearly a lifetime of false urgencies, intelligence failures, grandiose designs, and stereotyping of enemies and allies alike. America brought down the Soviet empire at the cold war’s most dangerous juncture, but even that victory was surrounded by myths, such as the conviction that we can easily shape the destinies of other people.

*Magic and Mayhem* is a strikingly original, closely informed investigation of two generations of America’s avoidable failures. In a perfectly timed narrative, Derek Leebaert reveals the common threads in these serial letdowns and in the consequences that await. He demonstrates why the most enterprising and innovative nation in history keeps mishandling its gravest politico-military dealings abroad and why well-credentialed men and women, deemed brilliant when they arrive in Washington, consistently end up leading the country into folly.

Misjudgments of this scale arise from a pattern of self-deception best described as "magical thinking." When we think magically, we conjure up beliefs that everyone wants to be like us, that America can accomplish anything out of sheer righteousness, and that our own wizardly policymakers will enable gigantic desires like "transforming the Middle East" to happen fast. Mantras of "stability" or "democracy" get substituted for reasoned reflection. Faith is placed in high-tech silver bullets, whether drones over Pakistan or helicopters in Vietnam.

Leebaert exposes these magical notions by using new archival material, exclusive interviews, his own insider experiences, and portraits of the men and women who have succumbed: George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and Presidents Kennedy, Carter, and George W. Bush all
appear differently in the light of magic, as do wise men from Harvard, Georgetown, Stanford, and think tanks such as RAND and Brookings, as well as influential players from the media and, occasionally, the military, including General David Petraeus as he personifies the nation’s latest forays into counterinsurgency.

*Magic and Mayhem* offers vital insights as to how Americans imagine, confront, and even invite danger. Only by understanding the power of illusion can we break the spell, and then better apply America’s enduring strengths in a world that will long need them.


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