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**William J. Burns.** *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal.* New York: Random House, 2019. ISBN: 9780525508861 (hardcover, \$32.00); 9780525508885 (paperback, March 2020).

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INTRODUCTION BY ELIZABETH C. CHARLES, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, AND  
JAMES GRAHAM WILSON, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE<sup>1</sup>

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In *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal*, William Joseph Burns writes about his life and times in the hope that his reflections—and regrets—will be helpful to the next generation of diplomats. Diplomacy “is by nature an unheroic, quiet endeavor,” as the author puts it, “less swaggering than unrelenting, often unfolding in back channels out of sight and out of mind.” (10) As he was taught early in his career, diplomacy is about managing problems, not solving them.

In 1982, Burns joined the United States Foreign Service, where he was seated (in alphabetical order) next to his future wife, Lisa Carty, in the A-100 orientation course for incoming diplomats. Together, they strove to protect America’s interests and champion its values throughout their careers of service. In the months following the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, Carty was the Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of State and Burns was the Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff. They later went to Moscow, Amman, back to Washington, back to Moscow, and back again to Washington, where a Republican president nominated Burns to be Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in 2008 and a Democratic president nominated him to be Deputy Secretary of State in 2011. He retired from the State Department on 3 November 2014.

The reviewers here are broadly positive. Susan Colbourn calls the book a “stand-out diplomatic memoir,” the scope of which “is nothing less than stunning.” According to James Goldgeier, it is “a memoir that will endure,” one that demonstrates that “good foreign policy is invisible.” James Lebovic considers it an “important book” that “is at its most powerful in making the case for active global engagement,” even as he questions some of the strategic alternatives for U.S. foreign policy over the past two decades that the author lays out.

“This book is a must read, and a good read,” writes Bruce Jentleson, who also points out that this memoir is “not one” such memoir that is nothing but “author self-aggrandizement.” Indeed, as a colleague from Burns’s first posting in Amman in 1982 later recalled, “Bill would never say anything, ever say anything. . . . He wouldn’t tell you that he had written and published a book. He wouldn’t tell you that his father was General Burns. He wouldn’t tell you a lot of things about himself. You literally had to pull it out of him.”<sup>2</sup> During his long career, Burns lived up to the model of public service set by his father, General William F. Burns, who headed the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency at the end of the Ronald Reagan administration. “Nothing can make you prouder,” the elder Burns once wrote to the younger one, “than serving your country with honor” (17).

Several of the reviewers note the invaluable online archive of primary documents that accompanies the book<sup>3</sup> and that allows readers to draw their own conclusions and write their own histories of the period about which Burns writes. And they should, because decisions on matters of war and peace deserve intense scrutiny from a diversity of perspectives. Histories of U.S. diplomacy over the past four decades have frequently relied on first impressions, even as the passage of time and the availability of declassified records can allow for sober reflection. It is worth noting, in the context of this book, that released

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States government.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Johnny Young, 21 October 2005, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington, Virginia, [http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Young,%20Johnny.toc.pdf?\\_ga=2.38685350.426677486.1573752267-179266451.1543423962](http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Young,%20Johnny.toc.pdf?_ga=2.38685350.426677486.1573752267-179266451.1543423962).

<sup>3</sup> Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, *The Back Channel: The Archive* (website), <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/back-channel/>.

volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series now include those covering Burns's early tenure during the Reagan administration, and are freely available.<sup>4</sup>

It is also worth noting that the women and men of the United States Foreign Service are proud patriots who do their jobs without fanfare and go to areas of danger to make America safe. Their stories will be on display in the newly-constructed National Museum of American Diplomacy,<sup>5</sup> which is under development, a few blocks from the National Mall and down the hall from the William J. Burns Auditorium in the George Marshall Wing of the Harry S Truman Building of the Department of State.

#### Participants:

**William J. Burns** is president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in 2014 after a thirty-three-year diplomatic career. He holds the highest rank in the Foreign Service, career ambassador, and is only the second serving career diplomat in history to become deputy secretary of state. Prior to his tenure as deputy secretary, Ambassador Burns served from 2008 to 2011 as undersecretary for political affairs. He was ambassador to Russia from 2005 to 2008, assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs from 2001 to 2005, and ambassador to Jordan from 1998 to 2001. Ambassador Burns earned a bachelor's degree in history from La Salle University and master's and doctoral degrees in international relations from Oxford University, where he studied as a Marshall Scholar.

**Elizabeth C. Charles** is a Historian in the Office of the Historian in the Foreign Service Institute at the U.S. Department of State. She received her Ph.D. from the George Washington University and is currently working on Soviet and arms control volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series.

**James Graham Wilson** is a Historian in the Office of the Historian in the Foreign Service Institute at the U.S. Department of State. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and is currently working on National Security Policy and arms control volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series.

**Susan Colbourn** is Henry Chauncey Jr. '57 postdoctoral fellow at International Security Studies at Yale University. At present, she is completing a history of NATO and the Euromissiles.

**James Goldgeier** is a Robert Bosch Senior Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution and Professor of International Relations at American University's School of International Service, where he served as dean from 2011-2017. He has written widely on U.S. foreign policy, including three books on the 1990s: *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1999); *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2003), co-authored with Michael McFaul; and *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), co-authored with Derek Chollet.

**Bruce W. Jentleson** is William Preston Few Professor of Public Policy and Professor of Political Science at Duke University. He also is a Global Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Chicago Council on Global Affairs. In 2015-2016 he was the Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress. He received the 2018 American Political Science

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian (website), <https://history.state.gov>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, The National Museum of American Diplomacy, Museum in Progress (website), <https://diplomacy.state.gov/museum-in-progress>.

Association (APSA) International Security Section Joseph J. Kruzel Award for Distinguished Public Service. His most recent book is *The Peacemakers: Leadership Lessons from 20th Century Statesmanship* (W.W. Norton, 2018).

**James H. Lebovic** is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, arms control, military budgets and procurement, foreign aid, democracy and human rights, international conflict, cooperation in international organizations, and military intervention. He is the author of six books including *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press 2019), *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Johns Hopkins University 2013), *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins University 2010), and *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge 2007). From 2015-2017, he served as chair of the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association.

REVIEW BY SUSAN COLBOURN, YALE UNIVERSITY

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The dust jacket for *The Back Channel* is a who's who of former Secretaries of State. Endorsed by Republicans and Democrats alike, the book's advance praise lauds not only the text, but also its author's own extensive career that spanned from Amman to Moscow and back to Washington at critical junctures. Sweeping and engaging, *The Back Channel* is a stand-out diplomatic memoir of Burns's own far-reaching career and the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War world.

Burns's memoir invites the reader into the world of diplomacy. Scattered throughout are colorful anecdotes and revealing portraits of his interlocutors, such as Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi's fashion choice for one meeting: pajamas, complete with a top covered in photographs of his fellow African strongmen. One can imagine Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger chain-smoking, or Hillary Clinton's work habits as Secretary of State. Rich with details, *The Back Channel* is also a reminder of the day-to-day realities that underpin diplomacy and the lives of those who practice it. Anecdotes about Burns's wife, Lisa, and their two daughters appear regularly, as do the most basic tools of the trade like the value of a good ambassadorial residence. Burns, reflecting on his time as ambassador in Russia, highlights the tens of thousands of guests who visited Spaso House, the ambassador's residence in Moscow, for everything from lectures to fashion shows during his three years as ambassador.

The scope of this book is nothing less than stunning. Following Burns's career is a tour through some of the most significant and contentious issues in U.S. foreign policy in recent decades, covering the end of the Cold War, NATO's enlargement to include former Warsaw Pact states, the Iraq War, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1, to name but a few. Burns had a front row seat for much: sitting in the Situation Room during the raid that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, or alongside Christopher Stevens's remains as they were returned home after the ambassador had been killed in Benghazi. Burns's recollections of successive tours through the Middle East, from his first assignment at the embassy in Jordan to his return as ambassador, and Russia, first as minister-counselor for political affairs and then as ambassador, underscore a fundamental message about both the continuities and the changes that have shaped U.S. diplomacy since Burns entered the foreign service in the early 1980s.

Burns's memoir carries a few clear messages. One is the fundamental value and purpose of diplomacy. He is realistic about what diplomacy can — and, crucially, cannot — achieve. Summing up the JCPOA, and its predecessor, the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), for instance, Burns concludes that neither were “perfect agreements” (383-384). But both were a testament to how diplomacy can work: it can probe opportunities, and use creative thinking and coalition-building to find solutions that begin to address critical concerns. Another theme, related to the first, is a reflection on the limits of U.S. power and the shortcomings of recent policy choices, including the erosion of diplomacy as a tool of statecraft. Burns does not mince his words, and is particularly critical of the damage done by the Iraq War launched by George W. Bush. “While we made halting attempts to promote greater political and economic openness throughout the Middle East,” Burns notes, considering the war's implications for the region, “the debacle in Iraq, including the miserable images from Abu Ghraib, poisoned America's image and credibility. If this was how Americans promoted democracy, few Arabs wanted any part of it” (197). All of this stands in marked contrast to his assessment of the first Bush administration. Burns lauds the example set by James Baker, describing George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State as “a superb problem-solver” and a skilled negotiator (47).

These two strands culminate in the final chapter, where Burns sketches out the problems ahead. Lamenting the lack of support for diplomacy, he recounts the problems facing the Department of State. These problems, Burns makes clear, did not originate with President Donald Trump, though Trump's erratic approach to foreign policy has made these problems all the more acute. “No longer the dominant player that we were after the end of the Cold War, no longer able to dictate events as we may sometimes have believed we could,” Burns writes, “we nevertheless remain the world's pivotal power” (400). Unsurprisingly, given Burns's career (or, for that matter, the book's subtitle), Burns emphasizes the crucial role for diplomacy in meeting the challenges to come. His case is compelling, a call for a clearer sense of strategy and of history.

For the archivally inclined, *The Back Channel* also offers a valuable glimpse into the diplomatic record. Alongside the selection of memos, emails, and cables included in the book's appendix, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (of which Burns is now president) hosts a series of documents from across Burns's career, including very recent materials which provide a peek at what remains classified.<sup>1</sup>

*The Back Channel* is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the evolution of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Burns gives a compelling overview of how diplomacy succeeded, identifies where it fell short, and offers insights into how it might be rejuvenated for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Back Channel: The Archive," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/back-channel/>.

REVIEW BY JAMES GOLDGEIER, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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William J. Burns, one of America's most distinguished diplomats, held a wide array of high-level positions at the State Department and overseas during the course of his foreign service career. He was a participant starting at a relatively young age in numerous important moments in American foreign policy, including the momentous series of events surrounding the end of the Cold War, the failed U.S.-led efforts to forge a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the rise and fall of U.S.-Russia relations, the mission to kill al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and the negotiations to halt the Iranian nuclear program. It was also Burns who accompanied the bodies of U.S. ambassador Chris Stevens and three of his colleagues from Libya back to the United States in 2012. Not surprisingly given his career choice, Burns is an unabashed proponent of diplomacy, and he argues that in an era when the United States is no longer as dominant as it was in the 1990s, the country requires more not less diplomacy to secure its interests.

The book showcases how good foreign policy is invisible,<sup>1</sup> with perhaps the most important example coming from Burns's time co-leading a back channel with Iran, helping to produce the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that halted Tehran's nuclear weapons program. The contrast between the painstaking invisible diplomatic work involved in helping to produce an agreement that served American interests so well and the highly visible decision by President Donald J. Trump to walk away from the agreement with no plan for what to do in its place could not be more striking. But it also brought home a lesson Burns learned early in his career: "the profession of a diplomat was only partially that of diplomacy; you had to know how to navigate politics and policymaking as well" (42). As he notes in his discussion of the George W. Bush years, he and his colleagues were able to achieve a long-sought "resolution of the Lockerbie terrorist attack, and Libya's abandonment of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction...[in part] because we had far more running room for diplomacy in the Bush administration on this issue than we did on Iraq or the peace process" (190-191). The agreements forged with Qaddafi did not solve everything, but they solved some important things. "That's ultimately what diplomacy is all about," writes Burns, "not perfect solutions, but outcomes that cost far less than war and leave everyone better off than they would otherwise have been" (195). And thus, he is unsparing in his critique of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which he calls "the original sin. It was born of hubris, as well as failures of imagination and process" (196).

Burns received a D.Phil. at the University of Oxford on a Marshall Scholarship under the tutelage of one of the leading scholars of international relations, Hedley Bull, who wisely told him, "[D]iplomacy is more often about managing problems than solving them" (20). His ascent in government was rapid, befitting his extraordinary talent for helping to manage problems.

The book is extremely valuable as a memoir of his time, providing insights into characters and the foreign policy process Burns engaged with personally; it is not an effort to incorporate the history that others have written of the period during which he served. His gift to historians, however, is not just on the pages of the book, but the website he created that hosts numerous cables, memos and emails he authored and was able to get declassified, a trove that will prove of tremendous value to scholars, students, and aspiring ambassadors.<sup>2</sup>

Burns provides marvelous descriptions of the many leading U.S. and world figures who appear in his journey, using his wry sense of humor to paint vivid pictures. At his first posting in Jordan in 1983, he met former (and future) Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "supremely confident but unfettered by much knowledge of the region" (26). Joining the Policy Planning Staff in 1989 as deputy director, he worked down the hall from Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, "a rumpiled, blunt-spoken, chain-smoking Foreign Service veteran, sometimes bursting at the seams of his aspirationally sized pinstriped suits" (46). At one meeting with Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, writes Burns, "Whenever he engaged in his

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<sup>1</sup> James Goldgeier and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Good Foreign Policy is Invisible: Why Boring is Better," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 February 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2017-02-28/good-foreign-policy-invisible>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Back Channel: The Archive," <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/back-channel/>.

disconcerting habit of pausing for two or three minutes in conversation midstream to stare at the ceiling, presumably to collect his thoughts, I would mentally try to name all the dictators so proudly displayed on his pajama top” (148). Meanwhile, “In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov’s...two-hour opening monologue was impressive for its sheer stamina, as well as for his dismal opinions of other regional leaders, whom he clearly regarded as venal lightweights (presumably in contrast to his weightier venality)” (279).

Burns captures the essence of individuals in a thorough yet succinct fashion, as in his assessment of what he calls Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “formula”: “Revive the state and its authority over politics, media, and civil society; regain control over Russia’s natural resources to fuel economic growth; and reverse nearly two decades of strategic retreat, rebuild Russian prerogatives as a great power, and reassert Russia’s entitlement to a sphere of influence in its own neighborhood” (207). Also impressive is his take-down of former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who, writes Burns, “embraced the biggest budget cuts in the modern history of the department; launched a terminally flawed ‘redesign process’; cut himself off from most of the building; drove out many of the most capable senior and mid-level officers; cut intake into the Foreign Service by well over 50 percent; and reversed what were already painfully slow trendlines toward better gender and ethnic diversity. Most pernicious of all was the practice of blacklisting individual officers simply because they had worked on controversial issues in the previous administration, like the Iran nuclear deal” (400).

Burns has much to say about one of the most consequential set of decisions made by the United States and its allies over the past two and a half decades: the enlargement of NATO across Central and Eastern Europe, nearly doubling its number of members and contributing to the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations. He had a particularly important vantage point as U.S. ambassador to Moscow in the runup to a public statement issued at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest declaring that “Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO” (239). In advance of the summit, the George W. Bush administration sought to provide Ukraine and Georgia with Membership Action Plans (MAPs), which would be a formal sign the countries were on a path to join, but France and Germany were vehemently opposed for fear of provoking Russia. Burns warned in multiple cables back to Washington prior to the Bucharest meeting that this issue was neuralgic for Russians across the political spectrum. Stating that Ukraine and Georgia would become members absent having to prove themselves through the MAP process solved nothing and arguably made matters worse from a NATO perspective.<sup>3</sup> And it highlighted a problem Putin had laid out for Burns when the latter presented his credentials as ambassador in 2005, “You Americans need to listen more. You can’t have everything your way anymore. We can have effective relations, but not just on your terms” (213). In 2007, Putin spoke to the annual Munich Security Conference and shocked his audience with a litany of complaints about American hegemony. Burns wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice afterward, “The Munich speech was the self-absorbed product of fifteen years of accumulated Russian frustrations and grievances, amplified by Putin’s own sense that Russia’s concerns are still often taken for granted or ignored” (224).

Burns sees the Bucharest summit declaration on Ukraine and Georgia as having been the moment when NATO went too far. He argues that the first two rounds of enlargement in 1999 and 2004, including membership for the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, were accepted by the Russians even if they remained unhappy. But with the NATO statement regarding future membership for Ukraine and Georgia, the Bush administration demonstrated it was not listening to the Russian concerns that Burns conveyed multiple times from Moscow. And there were moments when Burns did not have to deliver the Russian government’s attitudes toward Ukraine and Georgia himself. He recounts a meeting that Rice had with Putin in Moscow in October 2006, when the Russian president warned her, “If [Georgian President Mikhail] Saakashvili starts something, we will finish it” (202).

Burns argues, “The expansion of NATO membership stayed on autopilot as a matter of U.S. policy, long after its fundamental assumptions should have been reassessed. Commitments originally meant to reflect interests morphed into

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<sup>3</sup> Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, “A Mockery of Enlargement,” *The International Herald Tribune*, 8 April 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/nato-a-mockery-of-enlargement/>.

interests themselves, and the door cracked open to membership for Georgia and Ukraine—the latter a bright red line for any Russian leadership” (413).

Burns’s experiences in the field in Russia and the Middle East, and his work on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department in senior positions culminating in his service as Deputy Secretary of State, enable him to provide insights into the personalities and processes that produced some of the most consequential U.S. foreign policies over more than three decades. His service to the country has been invaluable, and he has provided a memoir that will endure.

## REVIEW BY BRUCE W. JENTLESON, DUKE UNIVERSITY

All too often memoirs are largely book-sales oriented revelations and author self-aggrandizement. “This is what *really happened* in the Situation Room, in those negotiations, in private conversations. And, by the way, on all those foreign policy failures, had they only listened to me...” William J. Burns’s *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* is not one of these. It is heavier on policy insights and analysis than pulling up of the curtains. And while not immune to some affirmations of his role and views, Burns also is open about his own *mea culpas*.

In serving as Deputy Secretary of State (2011 to his retirement in 2014) Burns was only the second active duty career Foreign Service to serve in that position. In his 32-year career he served in an array of high-level positions including Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Assistant Secretary for the Near East, Executive Secretary, Ambassador to Russia and to Jordan, Principal Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff, and National Security Council Senior Director for Near East Affairs. Had Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton won the 2016 presidential election, he well could have become the first career Foreign Service officer to become Secretary of State (other than Lawrence Eagleburger, who briefly held the position in the final months of the George H. W. Bush administration when James Baker moved to the White House to try to help rescue the Bush presidential campaign).

In Chapter 2 we get to see the 25 year-old Burns, having completed a D.Phil. at Oxford under the estimable Professor Hedley Bull, setting out in 1982 “on a diplomatic life” (23). Sharing his learning curve, trials and travails included, is important to Burns because most fundamentally this book is targeted at the younger generation as encouragement to pursue a diplomatic career. While this message is about diplomacy broadly construed—non-governmental organization (NGO) work, international organizations, governance building, global public health—Burns stresses the Foreign Service and related government career tracks (for example, the U.S. Agency for International Development). As he points out, between 1985-2000 the State Department budget declined 50% in real terms (393). And that was before the post-9/11 shifts to the military and the outsized allocations of State funds to Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as an approximately 1000% increase in diplomatic security (417). Yes, in the last few years State has been hit by the Trump wrecking ball, but its problems go deeper, including its need to be “a more dexterous institution” and reforming its own “far too rigid and anachronistic” personnel system (415).

Burns was not a dissenter in the manner of the 20 Foreign Service officers whose opposition to the 1970 bombing of Cambodia as part of the Vietnam War led to the creation of the official Dissent Channel within the State Department, or the 1993 Bosnia dissenters, or the 2017 dissenters over Trump’s anti-Muslim border closings.<sup>1</sup> His style/strategy was more one of developing a reputation not only as a skilled practitioner but also a strategic thinker willing to take issue with prevailing mindsets and framing paradigms. For example, while amply praising how President Bush and Secretary of State Baker handled the end of the Cold War, his subtitled of the chapter as “*Shaping Order*” (my italics) conveys a sense of the U.S. role as crucial but not determinative, an exemplary foreign policy strategy but not the chest-beating triumphalism so widely indulged in at the time (in the foreign policy community, not just the political world). This carries over into his 1993 transition memo for the incoming Clinton Administration stressing that while “the collapse of Communism represents an historic triumph for democracy and free markets . . . it has not ended history or brought us to the brink of ideological uniformity.” And that “democratic societies that fail to produce the fruits of economic reform quickly, or fail to

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Gurman, “The History of the State Department’s Dissent Channel – and How Trump Is Trying to Squelch It,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 February 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-history-of-the-state-departments-dissent-channel-and-how-trump-is-trying-to-squelch-it/>; Laura Blumenfeld, “A Sense of Resignation: The Bosnia Dissenters,” *Washington Post*, 28 August 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1993/08/28/a-sense-of-resignation-the-bosnia-dissenters/>; State Department, Dissent Channel Memorandum (no author, no date), “Alternatives to Closing Our Doors in Order to Secure Our Borders,” <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3438487/Dissent-Memo.pdf>.

accommodate pressures for ethnic self-expression, may slide back into other ‘isms,’ including nationalism or religious extremism or some combination of the two” (5).

Analytic insight-cum-dissent also was his tack in 2005 with incoming Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, with Burns being rather blunt about the Iraq War having led to “terminal chaos and warlordism in Iraq” as well as other Middle East consequences, and that “We have to be seen as part of the solution, not a part of the problem. This is not the case today” (195-196). Chapter 5 on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq and the overall Global War on Terrorism is thoroughly critical. “The inversion of force and diplomacy” is the chapter subtitle, and among the points made are “the ideological zeal with which war drums were beating” (162), the “neocon fantasy” of a Jeffersonian democratic Iraq (197), and that “in a Washington that rarely lacked for infighting and policy combat, the road to war in Iraq was distinctive for its intensity and indiscipline” (162).

On the Iraq War he does acknowledge not fighting harder to stop such profoundly flawed decisions as “my biggest professional regret” (169). He opens up about rationales for not doing so and the calculation—“conceit,” as he puts it—“that we could still help avoid even worse policy blunders from within the system than from outside it,” while also acknowledging self-interest and careerism (198).

Burns’s discussion of the American and British diplomacy that led to the 2003 agreement with Libya to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction programs and reach a settlement over Libya’s role in the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (147-150, 190-195) affirms the success achieved, later Libya policy failures notwithstanding.<sup>2</sup> Defending superhawk John Bolton is not something I often indulge in, but his invocation while Trump administration National Security Advisor of the “Libya model” in the 2018 nuclear negotiations with North Korea, meaning the 2003 diplomacy and not the 2011 regime change, did have some applicability. That this distinction did not hold up was in part due to Bolton’s own regime change mania. There also was an irony in that a key reason why the Libya 2003 diplomacy succeeded was that Burns, Secretary of State Colin Powell and others working on it managed to keep Bolton in the dark until right before its December 19 public announcement by British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The Iran chapter (9) is of particularly great value to scholars. While the chapter focuses principally on the diplomacy leading to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the fact that Burns’s career spanned the full period of the Islamic Republic of Iran—he took the Foreign Service entry exam just a few days after the 4 November 1979 Iranian hostage-taking seizure of the American embassy in Tehran—adds context and depth. At the beginning of the Obama administration we again see his strategic thinking in a memo to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sketching a strategy “to seek a long-term basis for coexisting with Iranian influence while limiting Iranian excesses” (346). When the secret talks were launched, Burns headed the U.S. delegation. The strategy pursued was a classic case of coercive diplomacy. By linking economic sanctions to a serious diplomatic effort, the Obama administration was able to achieve unprecedented multilateral cooperation, which both increased the economic impact on Iran and provided geopolitical credibility. Indeed, even amidst other tensions in U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations, the P-5+1 major powers coalition (United States, Britain, France, Russia and China as the five United Nations Security Council permanent members plus Germany and also the European Union) held together. While the threat of military action if diplomacy failed was officially claimed to be part of the strategy, and Burns affirms that the ultimate goal was of one way or another ensuring that Iran did not develop nuclear weapons, one still wonders whether President Barack Obama would have taken such action. Indeed, to the extent that the Iranians may not have perceived the military threat as all that credible, the case for the importance of savvy diplomacy is all the stronger. In closing this chapter Burns cites ample evidence that the JCPOA was working, and abandons the understated style of most of the book in criticizing President Donald Trump’s abrogation of the JCPOA as “visceral . . . risky, cocky, ill-considered” (385-386).

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, “Who ‘Won’ Libya: The Force-Diplomacy and Its Implications for Theory and Policy,” *International Security* 30:3 (Winter 2005-2006).

Other chapters provide other examples of diplomacy as strategy and not just process. Too often diplomacy proponents lapse into making process the ends not the means, overvaluing talking for talking's sake in ways that have too low a bar for acceptable progress or hang largely on rationalizations that war was avoided. While Burns's experiences show the importance of process, and the value of personal touches and nuances as well as ably working more formal proceedings, he also emphasizes the importance of solid underlying strategy. He does not take this so far as to be a guaranteed factor for the U.S. achieving its objective. For example, he subtitles the chapter on 1990s efforts to help Russian Prime Minister Boris Yeltsin succeed "the limits of agency." The same point runs through much of U.S. Middle East policy, a region which he characterizes as "best in class in dysfunction and fragility" (391).

As to America's global role going forward, Burns does not settle for just Trump-bashing. I have stated my own view many times that while there have been other Presidents whose foreign policy I disagreed with, there's never been one as fundamentally dangerous to the country and the world. Yet the strains and stresses and shortcomings of American foreign policy as well as the overarching Liberal International Order were there before Trump and America First. Post-Trump alternatives cannot just hark back to standard-fare invocations of American leadership.<sup>3</sup> Burns's core construct of the U.S. as the "pivotal power" (12, and Ch. 10 title) does have some of this. The meta-challenge is "to update international order in a way that reflects new realities but sustains our interests and values" (400). While I was not looking for bullet-pointed plans, I do find that he is less specific than I hoped: for example, he calls for greater priority to Asia but does not flesh out key policy elements; stresses more attention to governance in the Arab world, but with few initiatives for doing this better; urges the U.S. to get back in the Paris Climate Accords but without addressing concerns that even in the best case this agreement is insufficient to meet the climate change imperatives.

More broadly, he still may be over-extrapolating from the world of the second half of the twentieth century and underestimating the extent to which the fundamentals of the twenty-first century international system – the distribution of power both absolute and relative, the pluralization of diplomacy by which most states seek a range of relationships and prefer not to just sign up with one side or the other, the re-opening of ideological competition between democracy and various forms of authoritarianism, the intensified ways internal instability gets externalized to other states – make the challenges of leadership significantly different than they had been. Every era has its own mix of timeless and distinct dynamics within which states pursue their own mix of national interests and international order – perhaps a touch of Hedley Bull's classic conception of 'anarchical society' and historical perspective might enlarge the possible scenarios.

These concerns actually underscore the call for renewal of American diplomacy that animates the whole book. Throughout his career Burns personified the best of American diplomacy. And as an author Burns not only tells the stories and provides the data and analysis in ways that are of great value to scholars and policy professionals, he shows himself to be an agile and engaging writer. Meetings between Secretary of State Baker and Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad were "nine hours in a diplomatic cage fight" (44). When Burns went to the White House with Secretary of State Rice to discuss a possible diplomatic initiative with Iran, President Bush greeted him warmly while Vice President Cheney sat "less visibly enthused" (343). The portly Deputy Secretary Lawrence Eagleburger was "sometimes bursting at the seams of his aspirationally sized pinstripe suits" (46). And one I can't resist, that while "Obama's mantra of 'not doing stupid shit' was a sensible guideline, there were other scatological realities in foreign policy: "Shit happened too" (246-247).

This book is a must read, and a good read.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Liberal Order Isn't Coming Back: What Next?" *Democracy: Journal of Ideas* 48 (Spring 2018), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/48/the-liberal-order-isnt-coming-back-what-next/>, and "Right-Sizing Foreign Policy," *Democracy: Journal of Ideas* 54 (Fall 2019).

REVIEW BY JAMES LBOVIC, THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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In this important book, William J. Burns reflects on his multi-decade career as a foreign-service officer with an inside look at high-level consultations and negotiations attending the Soviet Union's collapse, the Arab Spring, U.S. intervention in Libyan, the Iran nuclear deal, Israel-Palestine negotiations, and the Syrian civil war. He peppers his recollections with fascinating personality profiles drawn from his encounters with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Yasser Arafat (as Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization and, later, President of the Palestinian National Authority), Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and others, on their home turf, as they sought to employ U.S. power, or neutralize it, for their own purposes.

The strength of the book lies in its message. Burns laments the passing of an era that ended with the September-11 attacks and the ensuing militarization of U.S. foreign policy. Yet Burns—the consummate diplomat—is uninterested in finger pointing and score settling. His book is not about good guys and bad guys, at home or abroad. Gracious in its praise, and measured in its criticism, the book focuses mainly on failures of policy. Indeed, Burns accepts some responsibility for these policy failures, as in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War, albeit in wishing he had done more to change the course of events. As he puts it, he and his like-minded colleagues did not “argue frontally against the bipartisan policy of eventual regime change, nor did we argue against the possible use of force much further down the road to achieve it. Instead, sensing the ideological zeal with which war drums were beating, we tried to slow the tempo and direct debate in a less self-injurious manner” (262).

The book is at its most powerful in making the case for active global engagement. Although academics, much like the general public, associate diplomacy with wars, or major crises, Burns establishes that diplomacy works more often, though less visibly, to avert wars and crises. In Burns's words, diplomacy “is by nature an unheroic, quiet endeavor, less swaggering than unrelenting, often unfolding in back channels out of sight and out of mind” (10). Of course, there's the rub. Triumphs of diplomacy are easy for outsiders to ignore or take for granted. Most Americans accept, as the normal state of affairs, a quality of life built through U.S. global cooperation and engagement. As a result, many Americans see only the costs, not the benefits, of U.S. global involvement. Indeed, for them, the cure is now the disease. For a vocal minority of Americans, vaccines, not small pox or polio, are the bigger health threat. For a larger portion of the U.S. population, alliances, trade partners, and global cooperation are the root of American problems.

The book cannot be read today, then, other than as a reaction to the transactional policies and assault on diplomacy and (domestic and international) norms of the current administration. Diplomacy competes at a serious disadvantage if “diplomacy is most often about quiet power, the largely invisible work of tending alliances, twisting arms, tempering disputes, and making long-term investments in relationships and societies” (406). Diplomacy is among the casualties of an age in which success is measured in sound bites and cutting insults, American interests are conflated with narrow, short-sighted achievements, and more value is given to crises created than to crises averted.

Burns foresees that it will take a generation to reverse the damage done to diplomacy in the post-9/11 era. Perhaps he is optimistic given the current state of American opinion. In his view, an effective revised course “will require a new compact with the American people—leveling with them about the purpose and limits of American engagement abroad, and demonstrating that domestic renewal is at the heart of our strategy and priorities” (12). But will the public accept the accompanying tradeoffs absent an overriding threat? Can a public that knows little about the world, and cares even less about it, accept a different world view when leaders—in both parties—contend, implicitly or explicitly, that domestic renewal requires putting ‘America first?’ Indeed, the 9/11 (and Cold War) experience tells us that big threats can inspire big crusades that provoke inevitable dissent and, eventually, isolationist sentiments.

More problematically, Burns sometimes overstates the U.S. capability to manage the future and overcome the past. Although he cautions against pursuing maximalist objectives with minimalist capabilities (335), he expects that outcomes in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and beyond would have substantially improved had U.S. leaders taken a different route. Thus, Burns laments the U.S. failure to commit military resources to the opposition at the beginning of the Syrian civil war and President Barack Obama's subsequent failure to act on his red-line threat when the Assad regime employed chemical weapons in that

country. He even argues that a stronger U.S. reaction to the chemical-weapons threat might have produced beneficial spillover effects. He notes that “a willingness to take more risks against the Assad regime after the Syrian civil war began in 2011 would have sent a strong signal to Iran, and cushioned the disquieting effect of the nuclear deal for the Saudis and our other traditional friends” (386).

Yet that conclusion is hard to reconcile with Burns’s assertion that the United States erred early in pushing prematurely for regime change in Syria. As he puts it, “more modest objectives (a much slower pace toward post-Assad governance, for example, and more concentrated means (such as an earlier, more robust train and equip program for the opposition) would have been a more coherent combination.” Would arming the opposition, while not pushing openly for a regime transition, have moderated the regime’s reactions? Moreover, would the revised approach have substantially improved the fortunes of the opposition or averted a bloody outcome, even absent Russian or Iranian military intervention? The United States, acting from a distance, was poorly positioned to alter the trajectory of events given the cross pressures and forces at work in the country, and region.

Elsewhere, Burns offers a seemingly grand vision for how the United States could have shaped the post-9/11 debate within the Islamic world. In his words, the United States could have done more to “help create a sense of geopolitical order that would deprive extremists of the oxygen they needed to fan the flames of chaos, and give moderate forces the sustained support they needed to demonstrate that they could deliver for their people” (159). Exactly how the United States could accomplish all of this given the available means and regional resistance is unclear. After all, Burns observes that serving U.S. “interests and values” would “have required patience in our diplomacy and a readiness to share in its design and execution” (199). He must also concede, then, that any such sharing would hold any solution hostage to the interests and values of other participants who, by Burns’s accounting, are long on suspicion and short on a willingness to cede control of the agenda. We can ask whether any such U.S. effort—on the Israel-Palestine front, for instance—might change only the character of the conflict, maybe even to make matters a whole lot worse.

The problem, as Burns knows well, is that diplomacy succeeds through baby steps while failure grows by leaps and bounds. Good policies typically produce small, gradual, and reversible changes, while failure can cascade and resonate through unpredictable fifth- and sixth-order consequences well into the future. The post 9/11 period drives home that point. The refugee influx that fueled right-wing sentiments in Europe had origins in a Syrian insurgency with roots in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Of course, these are not reasons to discount the value of dedicated diplomacy. If anything, they strengthen Burns’s case for a United States that leads through cautious and painstaking diplomacy and forsakes bold military operations that merely *promise* transformational benefits.

RESPONSE BY WILLIAM J. BURNS, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE

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I am deeply grateful for such generous reviews by such distinguished scholars as Susan Colbourn, James Goldgeier, Bruce W. Jentleson, and James H. Lebovic, and for Elizabeth C. Charles and James Graham Wilson's thoughtful introduction.

It is difficult to explain diplomacy, let alone enliven it; it oftentimes operates in back channels, out of sight and out of mind. Crises averted are less captivating than military victories; diplomacy's preventive care is less compelling than the military's surgical feats. Lebovic rightly recognizes that therein lies the rub, that "triumphs of diplomacy are easy for outsiders to ignore or take for granted... as a result most Americans see only the costs, not the benefits, of U.S. global involvement."

*The Back Channel* aims to address this deficit—drawing on episodes from my own checkered career and the kaleidoscope of problems and personalities I had to navigate. I tried hard to make vivid what diplomacy is, and is not; and what it can—and ultimately cannot—accomplish.

In addition to making an affirmative case for my former profession and for the dignity of public service, I also hoped to inform the scholarly debate on recent American diplomatic history. In the five years since I left government service, I have discovered that everything looks clearer from outside the arena—problems are more glaring, solutions are more obvious. The book tries to help scholars and students appreciate how much hazier things look while in motion, how difficult it sometimes is to foresee second- and third-order consequences, and the various factors that shape decisions beyond the merits of argumentation. By making publically available nearly 100 newly declassified cables, memos, and emails from my thirty-three-year career, I tried not only to provide a sample of one diplomat's imperfect efforts to provide ground truths, strategic advice, and—on occasion—disciplined dissent, but also to hold myself accountable to what I was thinking, reporting, and advising at the time, as opposed to what I wish I had said or advised.

What I hope comes through is that diplomacy is not some benign good. It is a tool (and as Jentleson argues, a strategy as well as a process), which can be used for good or ill. Regrettably, we have let that tool atrophy at precisely the moment when we need it most, when the United States is no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block, and when we can't get everything we want on our own, or by force alone.

To navigate today's more crowded, complicated, and contested international landscape, diplomacy ought to be our tool of first resort. For all the self-inflicted damage we have done to our role in the world, and to American diplomacy, I believe that diplomacy's renewal is both necessary and possible, and that it is the essential prerequisite to playing an effective pivotal, if not dominant, role at this rare and consequential plastic moment.

I do want to respond to two comments from the reviews, one about agency, and one about strategy.

On the question of agency, Lebovic argues that I sometimes "overstate the U.S. capability to manage the future and overcome the past," and that I suggest outcomes in a number of areas that "would have substantially improved had U.S. leaders taken a different route." This is a misreading of the book's argument. The challenge for diplomacy is to recognize the limits of agency, but not to miss moments when American leadership can help shape (but rarely determine) outcomes.

I purposefully subtitled the chapter on Russian President Boris Yeltsin's Russia as "the limits of agency" because my judgment is that while U.S. and Russia were not bound to the intense rivalry and unending suspicion we have today, it is hard to imagine how a different set of policy choices would have entirely mitigated Russia's post-Cold War sense of loss and indignity. In the Arab Spring, we made our fair share of tactical missteps and there were certainly things we could have done differently and better. It is hard to imagine, however, that the U.S. could have done anything to keep Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in place or to have prevented the chaos that followed. In Syria, a more coherent combination of ends and means and reacting sooner and more strongly to President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons *may* have given the

United States more diplomatic leverage and modestly enhanced the chances for a negotiated transition (335-336). But there were plenty of other forces in play and other players with a significant say.

None of that is to suggest that the United States' agency is marginal. It wasn't marginal in the way the George H.W. Bush administration artfully managed the end of the Cold War; and it certainly wasn't in the inartful—and disastrous—way the United States embarked on war with Iraq in 2003. As I argue, “It was beyond our power and imagination to remake the Middle East, with or without the overthrow of Saddam, but we could certainly make an already disordered region worse and further erode our leadership and influence. And we did” (199).

On the question of strategy, Jentleson and I agree that “neither unthinking retrenchment nor the muscular reassertion of old convictions will be effective prescriptions in the years ahead” (9). And he is right that the challenges for American leadership are going to be different in the coming century than they were in the last one. That is precisely why I sketched out an agenda for diplomacy's renewal, while arguing that the continued neglect of diplomacy's core purpose, role, and skills would be a grave mistake.

I still remember a conversation with Professor Hedley Bull at Oxford during one of our weekly tutorials: “You Americans tend to be impatient about the world's imperfections, and convinced that every problem has a solution... diplomacy is more often about managing problems than solving them.” Those words rang true throughout my diplomatic career. The problems facing the United States today are in many ways even more profound and harder to solve, but if we have any hope of managing them, we have no choice but to rediscover what American diplomacy can offer at its best, and to invest in its urgent renewal.