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## Review Essay 87

Stephen J. Hadley, ed., with Peter D. Feaver, William C. Imboden, and Meghan L. O’Sullivan, co-eds., *Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2023. ISBN-13: 978-0815739777

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### *Crusades Have Consequences*

Around the middle of 2014, President Barack Obama reportedly noted to his traveling press corps on Air Force One that a hallmark of his foreign policy was “don’t do stupid sh\*t.”<sup>1</sup> That realism contrasted to the previous administration of George W. Bush, an idealist who thought he could remake the world with American power. The statement certainly clashed with the unilateralist idealism of Obama’s inane successor, Donald Trump. This massive work, *Hand-Off*, a fascinating, revealing, and frustrating collection of Transition Memoranda written by Bush’s National Security Council, validates Obama’s remark. Two drawn-out wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan greatly undermined US foreign policy—and at the very least, America’s reputation of competence and trustworthiness. The Iraq War, after much hardship, stabilized, but not after revelations of torture that disenchanting the world. Suppressing the Taliban in Afghanistan was, ultimately, a failure. Both wars cost precious lives, American and foreign, as well as treasure. And the United States is still paying a terrible price; both boosted Donald Trump to office. Most likely at least through 2024, he will continue to plague American politics.

In short, Bush was a crusader, no less so than President Woodrow Wilson during World War I, and his idealistic forays poisoned American politics and society. For a president who initially sought to focus on the domestic arena, as he confesses in the forward to *Hand-Off*, ironically his bigger impact was in the global sphere and on US foreign policy. Furthermore, his stupid stuff also failed at home. The economy crashed on his watch, due to deregulation of financial markets and the shrinking of the middle class. While those processes stretched back to the Reagan era, Bush is especially guilty because of his free-market ideology and his bankrupting wars that ran up deficits while infrastructure crumbled at home, public education suffered, and millions went without healthcare. The Great Recession, like the wars, boosted the political fortunes of Trump. Policies and actions have long-term consequences.

In this collection, many authors acknowledge those consequences but they do not admit to their role in the Trump scourge. Disillusioned by Bush policies, and not satisfied with an Obama who struggled with economic recovery plans and with a failed foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, American voters turned to the demagogue Trump who capitalized on the dissent. He pushed a populist brand of isolationism and

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<sup>1</sup> David Rothkopf, “Obama’s ‘Don’t Do Stupid Shit’ Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/04/obamas-dont-do-stupid-shit-foreign-policy/>. Also rephrased more delicately as “don’t do stupid stuff.”

exacerbated the politics of resentment due to the second biggest depression in US history. Let us also not forget Bush's bungling response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, one that entrenched a view of government as incompetent and which foreshadowed Trump's own thoughtless actions during Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Surely, other factors played a part in Trump's rise, including cheerleading from Fox News, but Bush had already created the foreign policy (wars) and economic (hollowing out of the Midwest) environments that were ripe for this circus barker. Obama tried not to do stupid stuff, but he could not solve the Afghanistan dilemma. His unfortunately anemic response to the Great Recession (abetted by divisive Republicans), opened the door to the worst occupant of the White House in history. In *Hand-Off*, these former officials, most of whom despise Trump, nonetheless ignore that argument.

To be clear, there is much to commend in this volume. *Hand-Off* is a unique, scholarly, and insightful look at a range of Bush foreign policies (though mostly these are national security issues), and evaluations, so-called "postscripts," over a decade later, by those who wrote the transition documents. If the book comprised solely the Transition Memoranda, then the authors would be immune from criticism because these are useful, real-time documents, however one views Bush foreign policy. But in the postscripts, their authors know the future because they wrote their texts recently. Thus, this collection is fair game for reproach (and praise), as the authors' ideas and policies put Obama, and America, in a big hole.

Minimally redacted, the thirty Transition Memoranda are illuminating. They cover Bush ideology in the Freedom Agenda, the War on Terror, individual nations ranging from Pakistan to stabilization in Colombia to Israel and Palestine, nuclear proliferation (including threats from North Korea and Iran), great power rivalry in Europe, Russia, China, and India, the developing world's economic as well as health and disease challenges (and even pandemic preparedness), and then conclude with emerging issues like climate change and cyber issues (these two pieces appear as essays and not Memoranda), and authoritarian populism (with a dated focus on left-wing threats mainly from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, rather than on the United States' current-day rightwing nationalism).<sup>2</sup> As Hal Brands points out, that fact that these documents have been declassified well before the 25-year rule kicked in does readers a big favor. As well, *Hand-Off* ends with concluding essays by three scholars. Melvyn Leffler considers Bush's foundational "Freedom Agenda," and Brands tallies the successes and failures of the administration.<sup>3</sup> One can hardly quibble with the balanced assessments gleaned from their historical microscopes.

The last essay (and chapter) of the collection might actually have been placed at the beginning because it is so essential to setting the stage for the Transition Memoranda. Political scientist Martha Joynt Kumar explains the process of presidential transitions.<sup>4</sup> She focuses on the hand-off from Bush to Obama, which all agree was the gold-standard of civility and professionalism when it came to presidential transfers of power, when compared to the last two that were so troubled by the shameless, chaotic imbecility of Donald Trump. Actually, she provides one of the few positive events of the Trump administration in *Hand-Off*; Trump's last NSC advisor, Robert O'Brien, tried gallantly to help in the handover to the Biden team, including calling heads-of-state. Joynt Kumar also expertly details how the Transition Memoranda came into being and their

<sup>2</sup> After Bush's forward, a preface by Condoleezza Rice and Stephen Hadley, the editors' general introduction, and then an introduction by Hadley to Part I that is curiously named, and rather hagiographically, focused on the "soul" of Bush's foreign policy, the thirty-two chapters follow. They are divided by Parts: Part I is The Soul of Bush Foreign Policy, with the sole chapter being the Freedom Agenda; Part 2: The War on Terror; Part 3: Interventions and Stabilizations (all but one of which deals with a nation); Part 4: The Proliferation Problem; Part 5: Great Power Competition; Part 6: Developing World and Regional Security Challenges; Part 7: Emerging Challenges (cyber, climate, and authoritarianism); and Part 8: Commentary (the Leffler, Brands and Joynt Kumar essays that round out the collection The thirty Transition Memoranda (with postscripts and lists of documents) comprise most of the chapters.

<sup>3</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, "An Illuminating Hand-Off" in Peter D. Feaver, William C. Imboden, and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, eds., *Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2023; hereafter *Hand-Off*), 635-657; Hal Brands, "Reassessing Bush's Legacy: What the Transition Memoranda Do (and Don't) Reveal," in *Hand-Off*, 658-675.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Joynt Kumar, "Transferring Presidential Power in a Post-9/11 World," in *Hand-Off*, 676-697.

content, including an abundance of appended documents that appear only as lists of tabs in many chapters but which are digitally archived at Jeffrey Engel's Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University and can be accessed on its website.<sup>5</sup> All forty of the Memoranda, including the thirty in this book and the ten that did not appear (some of which have yet to be declassified), along with invaluable meeting notes, phone calls, and speeches that served as source material, will be posted at the Center, alongside other Bush-related projects that Engel has tirelessly orchestrated.<sup>6</sup>

The postscripts, written by the same authors of the Memoranda during the transition to Obama in 2008–2009, provide rare insight into the thoughts of an administration. They will also prompt reaction from historians. While National Security Council (NSC) Advisor Stephen Hadley writes the introduction to each section, and generally finds his own foreign policy record to be a success, some of the authors are more self-critical. While they show how much thought, effort, and even anguish goes into the making of foreign policy, most of them are not critical enough. They have the habit of kicking the bucket of blame for any failures down the road to their successors, like Obama and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, who supposedly “downplayed democracy and human rights” when they took office, write Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner. Not only was that not true (and Obama won a Nobel Peace Prize that, in part, proves the opposite), but on the very same page on which their remark appears, in a postscript to the first Transition Memorandum on the Freedom Agenda, the two also note that a decline in freedom around the world started in 2006.<sup>7</sup> That was on Bush's watch. Indeed, problems emerged in a vastly reshaped world fifteen or twenty years after Bush took office, a world he could justifiably not have anticipated.

For sure, there was substantial good done by this administration, including the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) campaign in Africa that helped millions of people. Bush can be credited, as well, for his farsightedness in setting the table on a host of issues that would be greater problems today if he had not acted: embracing a rising India, climate change (though experts will never forgive his rejection of the Kyoto Protocol though, contrary to conventional wisdom, he made headway on cutting greenhouse gases), and, overall, in raising expenditures and overseeing organization and coordination that transformed development in the Global South.<sup>8</sup> This latter effort was truly impressive in the amount of money spent, the number of trade agreements signed with nations, and the success in modernization and health benefits that lifted people out of poverty.

There are also issues Bush cannot be blamed for, such as a People's Republic of China, which was not such an aggressor during his presidency. He could also not have anticipated the growth in homegrown terrorism. Of course, he did view Russian president Vladimir Putin's soul, but, as Brands notes, all presidents since World War II trusted their instincts and had failed to change Moscow's behavior.<sup>9</sup> In sum, one can positively assess many elements of this administration's policies. Nonetheless, Bush also did some major stupid stuff, and that trumps everything else; the elephant in the room—the 2016 election—ultimately looms over everything he did.

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<sup>5</sup> Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University, The Transition project, <https://www.smu.edu/Dedman/Research/Institutes-and-Centers/Center-for-Presidential-History/CMP/The-Transition>, accessed September 19, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> The ten unpublished Transition Memoranda are: Darfur, Defense Transformation and Global Defense Posture Realignment, Eurasia Energy, The Horn of Africa, Intelligence Reform and New Ways to Do Intelligence, National Space Policy, NATO Transformation, Nuclear Posture Review, and Turkey/PKK.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, “Postscript,” in *Hand-Off*, 23-26.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Dybul and Dan DeRuiter, “HIV/AIDS” in *Hand-Off*, 497-503; Mark Webber, “India Postscript” in *Hand-Off*, 455-462; James L. Connaughton, “Climate Change: Climate Change and Clean Development,” in *Hand-Off*, 599-613.

<sup>9</sup> Brands, “Reassessing Bush's Legacy” in *Hand-Off*, 671.

The officials in *Hand-Off* concede that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars could have been run better, but they largely dodge the moral side of the conflict. Worse, some couch the torture and renditions as unfortunate by-products of war. Bush cannot hide the skeletons in the closet, which came back to haunt his administration. Meghan O’Sullivan, author of the postscript on the Transition Memorandum on Iraq and the Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, holds that the Iraq invasion was “an option of last resort” for Bush.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, perhaps not; regime change in Iraq had long been on the table well before his tenure. Unfortunately for his reputation, he chose war. That conflict was unpopular at home, despite the capture of Iraq’s president Saddam Hussein, and it gave rise to the horror of please use the full title (ISIS). Iraq remains a failing state. Trump blamed Obama (and Bush) for ISIS, and he was not wrong.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Bush curiously appears above it all, especially for Stephen Hadley, who portrays his president as a far-seeing statesman. He states that “President Bush was also a realist,” after spending pages introducing the idealistic Freedom Agenda crusade, because, in his telling, Bush believed in a realist balance-of-power that leaned toward freedom.<sup>12</sup> First off, however, did not all postwar presidents share that view and seek that same result? Second, was not the Freedom Agenda thrust on him by 9/11, rather than being generated by years of thought? *Hand-Off* does not illuminate much on Bush himself. He does not seem to have held a grand philosophy or deep strategic vision on foreign policy, save for a general adherence to the notion of democratic or capitalist peace. Take Iraq. This book does not present a complete accounting of the reasons behind his invasion; there is no mention of oil or revenging the image of his father, President George H.W. Bush, of being too cautious toward Saddam Hussein, however much these two motivations might be doubted today. *Hand-Off* authors see problems with Iraq, to be sure; stabilization and reconstruction “were not fully realized, and the Bush administration proved unable to institutionalize capacity for these operations sufficiently within the US government before it left office,” writes Richard Hooker in a postscript.<sup>13</sup> Still, officials, Bush included, then explain that all was made right by the Surge in 2007. By that time, Americans were sick of the Iraq War, just wanting it to go away.

Bush was an MBA who applauded free enterprise; that is, Bush himself notes that all he cared about was his domestic economic agenda coming into office. Yet recall that his presidency sputtered along aimlessly until September 11 saved it. His administration responded appropriately to the terrorist attack by reconceptualizing and renovating the national security establishment. Then he proceeded to mess things up with the Iraq War. Trump’s idiocy saved Bush’s legacy, to an extent, or it at least hid it. But even if we give Bush kudos for his organizational response to 9/11, as the officials in *Hand-Off* do, he blew it.

As a crusader, Bush abandoned decades of realism in foreign policy, and thus opened the door to a unilateralist like Trump. Leffler’s essay is instructive here. Bush’s mission in his Freedom Agenda stressed that, as Leffler reveals in citing a Bush pronouncement, “America was a benighted nation seeking to bring justice and liberty to the rest of the world.”<sup>14</sup> In their preface, Hadley and NSC Advisor/Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argue for a mix of idealism and realism, but they support Bush because “power had to have a purpose.” The “tensions between American values and its interests” could result in the imposition of force to accomplish freedom and democracy. But “Afghanistan and Iraq were special cases,” write these two advisors.<sup>15</sup> It turns out, however, that they were the *determinative* cases in Bush’s foreign policy, ones that shaped the national dialogue over the next two administrations, and into Biden’s. Leffler insightfully will have none of it, though he is more understanding of the motivations behind such thinking than I am. Added together, he writes, a fear of terrorism, the power to assuage that fear through preemptive action or coercive diplomacy (Bush’s term, whatever that is), and the hubris of thinking that America could act simply backfired.

<sup>10</sup> Meghan L. O’Sullivan, “Postscript,” in *Hand-Off*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> O’Sullivan, “Postscript,” 176-177.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen J. Hadley, “Part I: The Soul of Bush Foreign Policy,” in *Hand-Off*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Hooker, “Postscript,” in *Hand-Off*, 231.

<sup>14</sup> Leffler, “An Illuminating Hand-Off,” in *Hand-Off*, 650.

<sup>15</sup> Condoleezza Rice and Hadley, “Preface,” in *Hand-Off*, xiv, xxvi.

Rather than pursuing a broad ideological framework, the Freedom Agenda “did little to identify vital interests.”<sup>16</sup> Nor did Bush have the means to do so. Therefore, he overtaxed his military, the nation-building effort, and the American public’s patience. Rather than blame his successors, NSC officials in *Hand-Off* (as well as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Rice, and others) should have blamed themselves for their coercive idealism that failed, and that then prompted the country’s cynicism to the advantage of a nasty opportunist like Trump.

The dustjacket blurbs from Senator Rob Portman, Bob Woodward, Jon Meacham, and James Baker rightly applaud the appearance of these Transition Memoranda and the willingness of their authors to learn from history. It is all the more grating, though, that that history apparently does not include Trump. An “honest critique,” in Baker’s words, would lead to the conclusion that the weaknesses in Bush’s crusade had detrimental consequences for democracy in the United States.

So, imagine poor Barack Obama in 2009, ready to assume office. Bush dumped two wars in his lap. For sure, this was a “wartime” transition, but it was not an historic just-war period, as the Bush administration portrayed it, likening it to the hand-off from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Harry Truman in the Second World War. That is because one of these wars was totally unnecessary, the other was totally unwinnable. Obama’s entire foreign policy started with the burden of his predecessor’s mistakes. Add in a great depression, of which there is curiously no Transition Memorandum, supposedly because the economic crisis was beyond the scope of the NSC—even though it reached beyond America’s shores and thus affected national security. And how, moreover, could the NSC not take into account the consequences of these wars in terms of the domestic economy? Add in a terrified, exhausted, morose, desperate, and increasingly distrustful public, spurred on to negativity and cynicism by rising populism on the right that soon triumphed in Congress in the Tea Party and further hindered the president’s agenda. Let us not forget, as well, the Occupy Movement on the left that produced a viable rival for presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, in Obama’s own party. Obama might have said “yes we can,” but he knew that his hopeful campaign stared straight up a hill of troubles. In these uncertain times, late in Obama’s second term, an unqualified and noisy presidential aspirant, Donald Trump, pawed the ground. He then rather idealistically expounded an America First policy, as if that were possible in modern times, but it was an effective counter to Bush’s crusading zeal that had set the tone years before.

Americans could be excused for losing their minds in 2016 if they focused on Bush’s two big mistakes. In Afghanistan, as the authors of the postscript to that country’s Transition Memorandum note, “by virtually every meaningful metric, the situation was still getting worse, not better” by the end of Bush’s term.<sup>17</sup> The Memorandum itself recommended three steps to advance American goals and respond to the situation: deepen post-war stabilization and development, increase Afghanistan’s “resilience” against the Taliban insurgency, and induce a shift in Afghan-Pakistan relations. It is the second step—resilience—that sputtered despite massive efforts on toward the first and third ones.<sup>18</sup> Trump campaigned vigorously against the ongoing war (which he had not necessarily opposed), and he then pledged to win it once in the White House, before he backed away. Still, in the 2016 campaign, he called the war in Iraq “the worst decision ever made in the history of our country.”<sup>19</sup> Voters seemed to agree, favoring his harsh criticism of the war, and that helped him win the election.

He then went on a rampage of destruction through his personal diplomacy and half-baked ideas. That dark history is well known. Trump made America an unreliable partner with friends and allies, worried nations that

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<sup>16</sup> Leffler, “An Illuminating Hand-Off,” 654. See also Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), in which he details this argument.

<sup>17</sup> Paul D. Miller, Douglas Lute, Meghan Sullivan, “Postscript” in *Hand-Off*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Transition Memorandum, Afghanistan, January 16, 2009, in *Hand-Off*, 115-134.

<sup>19</sup> Trump Campaign Press Release, February 20, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/trump-campaign-press-release-trump-pope-did-not-understand-illegal-immigration-crime>. Accessed September 1, 2023.

were dependent on US aid by threatening cutbacks in his transactional approach, and undermined international agreements—and American power and influence—by withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the multilateral Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to limit Iran’s nuclear weapons capabilities. His stunning stupidity in enhancing the credibility of rivals like Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping rendered the United States a laughingstock when it came to talk about democratic processes, leadership, presidential engagement, and functional governing. Trump also helped bring the Taliban back into power (to nobody’s surprise), ruined faith in interagency collaboration in the intelligence and law enforcement sectors, and divided the body politic at home.<sup>20</sup> George W. Bush is guilty in bringing this travesty of an administration into office.

Obama made the best of these circumstances, while Bush, the Crusader-in-Chief, disappeared to Texas, seemingly washing his hands of the messes he created while painting portraits as a hobby. “I remain at peace with the decisions I made as president,” writes Bush in the forward.<sup>21</sup> That is a remarkably foolish statement, considering that his foreign policy created Donald Trump, and thus harmed the United States and its future.

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<sup>20</sup> For Trump consequences in *Hand-Off*, see, for example, 82-84, 129, 382, 410, 437-439, 484, 533, 555. See also Thomas W. Zeiler, “This is What Nationalism Looks Like,” in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 136-150; Thomas W. Zeiler, “What Trump’s Nationalism Ended up Looking,” Robert Jervis, Diane N. Labrosse, Stacie E. Goddard, and Joshua Rovner, eds., *Chaos Reconsidered: The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 76-81.

<sup>21</sup> President George W. Bush, “Forward,” in *Hand-Off*, xix.