

Steven Simon

GRAND DELUSION: THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICAN AMBITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Steven Simon, a seasoned veteran of American foreign policy with a career spanning the State Department and the National Security Council, offers a profoundly insightful and often searing critique of four decades of U.S. engagement in the Middle East in his latest book, 'Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East'. Building upon his extensive experience as both a participant and a scholar (as evidenced by his previous works such as 'The Age of Sacred Terror' and 'The Sixth Crisis'), Simon provides a nuanced and meticulously researched account of how American aspirations for shaping the region repeatedly clashed with complex realities, leading to a cycle

of costly interventions and eventual re-trenchment. The book's central thesis is that a persistent 'grand delusion', rooted in American exceptionalism, a frontier mentality, perceived invulnerability, and disproportionate mid-20th-century power, led policymakers to superimpose ambitious, often unrealistic, ideas onto the diverse and often antithetical political, social, and historical landscapes of the Middle East. This resulted in a consistent pattern of misjudgement, unintended consequences, and ultimately, the erosion of American influence and credibility in the region.

Simon structures his argument chronologically, dedicating individual chapters to presidential administrations

from Jimmy Carter to Joseph Biden, illustrating how each contributed to or grappled with the unfolding 'grand delusion'. The *Introduction: What Went Wrong?* (pp. 1–20) sets the stage by highlighting the dramatic shift in American posture towards the Middle East, from Ronald Reagan's declaration of global stakes in a Lebanese conflict to Donald Trump's transactional approach and perceived disengagement. Simon provides essential historical context, tracing earlier American interactions with the region, from the Barbary Wars to the post-World War II era, demonstrating how recurring themes of commercial interests, missionary zeal, and strategic competition with other powers shaped early engagements, albeit on a smaller scale than the post-1979 period.

Chapter 1, *Jimmy Carter: Opening Act* (pp. 21–42), positions the Carter administration as the unwitting architect of the 'great entanglement'. Simon argues that while Carter's focus on the Israeli-Egyptian peace process was a significant diplomatic achievement, it distracted from anticipating the impending revolution in Iran. Chapter 2, *Ronald Reagan: Empathy and Indecision* (pp. 43–105), delves into the Reagan administration's oscillating approach. Simon details the ill-fated intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, stemming from a desire to restore Lebanese sovereignty and further the peace process, which ultimately led to tragic losses and a realisation of the region's complex and intractable conflicts. The analysis of the Iran-Contra affair is particularly detailed, portraying it as a desperate and misguided attempt to engage with Iran,

driven by a fear of Soviet influence and a desire to free hostages, ultimately undermining U.S. credibility and inadvertently benefiting Iraq. Subsequent chapters continue this historical trajectory. Chapter 3, *George H. W. Bush: The Old New World Order* (pp. 106–139), focuses on the first Gulf War, which Simon argues was a success in repelling Iraqi aggression but sowed the seeds for future entanglement by leaving Saddam Hussein in power and establishing a significant U.S. military presence in the Gulf. Chapter 4, *William J. Clinton: Enlargement and Containment* (pp. 140–184), explores the post-Cold War era, characterised by efforts to contain Iraq and Iran while pursuing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which ultimately faltered. Chapter 5, *George W. Bush: Wrong Man, Wrong Time* (pp. 185–247), offers a scathing critique of the decision to invade Iraq after 9/11, portraying it as the apex of the 'grand delusion', based on flawed assumptions and leading to immense human and financial costs. Chapter 6, *Barack H. Obama: Live and Learn* (pp. 248–307), examines Obama's attempts to pivot away from costly interventions, his engagement with the Arab Spring, and the complexities of the Syrian conflict and the Iran nuclear deal, highlighting the persistent challenges of disentanglement. Chapter 7, *Donald J. Trump: The Deal of the Century* (pp. 308–335), analyses Trump's transactional and disruptive approach, which further eroded traditional alliances while achieving some diplomatic breakthroughs, such as the Abraham Accords. Finally, Chapter 8, *Joseph Biden: Back to the Future?* (pp. 336–350), offers a speculative look

at the Biden administration's early attempts to recalibrate U.S. policy, suggesting a potential return to earlier patterns of engagement despite competing global priorities.

Simon's methodology is a significant strength of the book, effectively integrating an interdisciplinary approach that enhances its depth and breadth. Drawing on his background in political science and history, he weaves together diplomatic history, military strategy, and a keen understanding of bureaucratic politics. Furthermore, his personal reflections as an insider, particularly in the Preface (pp. 7–10) and woven throughout chapters like *Ronald Reagan: Empathy and Indecision* (pp. 43–105), offer a unique and valuable perspective, providing a glimpse into the mood, aspirations, and limitations of policymakers during critical moments. This memoiristic element, though subtle, distinguishes the book from purely academic accounts. Simon's engagement with the psychological biases of policymakers, such as confirmation bias, and his analysis of the tension between intentionalists and consequentialists (Preface, pp. 9–10), demonstrate an integration of psychological and sociological insights into his historical narrative.

One of the book's key strengths lies in its critical evaluation of American decision-making. Simon is unflinching in his assessment of the 'appalling errors' (Introduction, p. 4) that characterised U.S. policy. He meticulously details instances where intelligence analysis was disregarded or misinterpreted, such as the intelligence community's warnings about the stability of the Shah's regime

(Chapter 1, p. 38) or the analysts' pessimism regarding Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon (Chapter 2, p. 63). His analysis of the policymaking process during the Lebanese intervention (Chapter 2, pp. 55–66) and the Iran-Contra affair (Chapter 2, pp. 77–92) highlights the dysfunction within the Reagan administration, the infighting among cabinet members, and the reliance on unscrupulous middlemen, demonstrating how internal dynamics contributed to flawed policies. Simon's critique of the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq (Chapter 5, pp. 185–247) is particularly compelling, arguing that it was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the region and fuelled by an overestimation of American capacity to reshape it. He effectively uses casualty and cost statistics from sources like Brown University's 'Cost of Conflict' report (Introduction, p. 4) to underscore the tangible consequences of these policy failures.

While the entire book offers a compelling and critical narrative, certain chapters stand out for their novelty and originality compared to other studies in the field. Chapter 2, *Ronald Reagan: Empathy and Indecision* (pp. 43–105), offers a particularly detailed and insightful account of the Iran-Contra affair, drawing on both public records and potentially his own insider knowledge to paint a vivid picture of the misguided initiative. His exploration of the confluence of factors, from the fear of Soviet influence to the desire to free hostages and the involvement of colourful characters like Manucher Ghorbanifar and Richard Secord, provides a more comprehensive

understanding of this complex scandal than often found in broader historical surveys. The chapter's analysis of the Israeli role in the arms sales (pp. 77–92) and the subsequent damage control efforts is also particularly strong, highlighting the complexities of the U.S.-Israeli strategic relationship.

Another chapter that stands out is Chapter 5, *George W. Bush: Wrong Man, Wrong Time* (pp. 185–247). While the Iraq War has been extensively studied, Simon's analysis benefits from his position as a former insider. His detailed examination of the flawed intelligence, the ideological motivations of key policymakers, and the disconnect between aspirations and realities on the ground offers a powerful indictment of the decision-making process that led to the invasion and its disastrous aftermath. He effectively demonstrates how the 'grand delusion' reached its zenith during this period, with the belief that American power could easily transform the Middle East into a democratic and stable region.

Despite its many strengths, the book does have some potential weaknesses. While Simon is critical of American policy, at times, the narrative could benefit from a more explicit engagement with the perspectives and agency of Middle Eastern actors beyond their reactions to U.S. actions. For instance, while he discusses the motivations of figures like Ayatollah Khomeini (Chapter 1, pp. 39–40) and Saddam Hussein (Chapter 2, p. 79), a deeper exploration of the internal dynamics and historical trajectories of these countries, independent of American influence, could further enrich the analysis. While the book acknowledges the

human cost of American interventions (Introduction, p. 4), a more sustained focus on the lived experiences of Middle Eastern populations affected by U.S. policies would add another layer of critical evaluation. For example, while the Sabra and Shatila massacre is discussed (Chapter 2, pp. 56–57), the long-term impact on the Palestinian community is not fully explored.

Furthermore, while the chronological structure is effective in tracing the arc of American engagement, at times, the connections between different administrations and the evolution of the 'grand delusion' could be more explicitly highlighted. While the Introduction sets up the overarching theme, a more consistent return to the central thesis throughout the individual chapters could reinforce the book's core argument.

Engaging with Simon's arguments, one original insight that emerges is the cyclical nature of American foreign policy in the Middle East, driven by a persistent inability to learn from past mistakes. Each administration, despite different approaches and stated goals, seems to fall prey to variations of the same 'grand delusion' – whether it is the belief in the transformative power of diplomacy (Carter), military intervention (Reagan, G.W. Bush), or strategic partnerships (Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Trump). The book implicitly suggests that the allure of reshaping the region, whether for strategic, economic, or ideological reasons, has consistently outweighed a sober assessment of the inherent limitations of American power and the complexities of the Middle East. My

perspective adds value by framing this pattern not just as a series of individual policy failures but as a deeper structural issue rooted in American self-perception and a reluctance to accept the limits of its influence in a region with its own deeply entrenched historical forces.

'Grand Delusion' fits within a broader literature on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, engaging with and building upon the work of scholars and policymakers who have analysed various aspects of this complex relationship. It aligns with critical accounts of the Iraq War, such as those by Rajiv Chandrasekaran ('Imperial Life in the Emerald City') and Thomas E. Ricks ('Fiasco'), by highlighting the flawed assumptions and poor execution of the invasion and occupation (Chapter 5, pp. 185–247). The book also resonates with studies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. mediation efforts, such as those by Dennis Ross ('The Missing Peace'), offering a critical perspective on the limitations of American diplomacy in achieving a lasting settlement (Chapters 4, p. 6). Simon's analysis of the Iran-Contra affair (Chapter 2, pp. 77–92) contributes to the extensive literature on this scandal, offering new insights from his insider perspective. Furthermore, the book implicitly engages with broader debates about American exceptionalism and its impact on foreign policy, a theme explored by scholars like Stephen Walt ('The Hell of Good Intentions') and Andrew Bacevich ('The Limits of Power').

The target audience for 'Grand Delusion' is broad. It would appeal to students of international relations, history, and Middle East studies, providing

a comprehensive and critical overview of U.S. policy in the region. Policymakers and foreign policy analysts would also find the book highly relevant, offering valuable lessons from past mistakes and prompting reflection on future approaches. Given Simon's accessible writing style and the compelling nature of the narrative, the book would also be of great interest to general readers seeking to understand the complexities of America's involvement in the Middle East and its enduring consequences.

In conclusion, Steven Simon's 'Grand Delusion' is a groundbreaking and essential book for understanding the trajectory of American foreign policy in the Middle East over the past four decades. Through meticulous research, insider insights, and an interdisciplinary approach, Simon effectively argues that a persistent 'grand delusion' about American capacity and the region's malleability led to a cycle of costly interventions and, ultimately, diminished influence. The book's strengths lie in its detailed historical narrative, critical analysis of decision-making, and the author's unique perspective as a participant. While a more in-depth exploration of Middle Eastern agency and a more consistent emphasis on the central thesis throughout could enhance the work, 'Grand Delusion' is a significant contribution to the literature on U.S. foreign policy and a powerful reminder of the dangers of unchecked ambition in a complex world. Simon's work serves as a crucial, albeit sobering, guide for navigating the challenges of future engagement in the Middle East.

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