

Samantha Power

Values and Idealism in Foreign Policy

What should guide American foreign policy?

This fundamental question has divided the political and academic world for decades. But it is also a relevant question for every American, because it gets to the character of our nation and its place in the world.

The Trump administration has set a course of “America First,” rejecting multilateralism and values-based foreign policy because it views the international system as inherently nationalistic – a never-ending global battlefield where each state is ultimately on its own. Idealistic visions of sustained international cooperation are little more than pipedreams and basing our foreign policy on them only makes us vulnerable to exploitation. If America wants to do well in the harsh environment of global politics, it needs to focus more on its self-interest and worry less about maintaining good relationships with other countries.

This “America First” foreign policy is a drastic departure from the Obama era, where multilateralism and liberalism were cherished principles upheld almost to a fault. Preserving (and rebuilding) alliances in Europe and Asia was made a priority, as was forging new, cooperative relationships with long-standing adversaries like Iran or Cuba. Much of the Obama administration’s foreign policy was guided by the idea that American engagement and diplomacy would advance democracy, peace, and human rights. In the long run, persistent advocacy of these values might lessen conflict and radicalism in the world and make for a safer, more prosperous America.



Power addressing the U.N. Security Council as U.S. Ambassador

(Photo Credit: Frank Franklin/AP)

As President Obama’s U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, **Samantha Power** was one of the most vigorous proponents of this liberal U.S. foreign policy. She facilitated multilateral cooperation at the U.N. and passionately argued for humanitarian intervention in Libya during the 2011 civil war there. The current “assault” on core American values, including “the practical necessity of global cooperation,” motivated Power to publish a memoir providing insight into the experiences that shaped her view of the world. In *The Education of an Idealist*, she lays out a case for idealism and values-based diplomacy as guiding principles of American foreign policy, drawing on her background as an Irish-American immigrant, a journalist covering the Yugoslav Wars, and a fierce human rights advocate.

Do We Have A Responsibility to Protect?

At the 2005 World Summit, the United Nations member states endorsed a global commitment to prevent and stop genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. This norm is known as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and first entered the public conversation after the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 and the ethnic killings in the Yugoslav Wars. While certainly a noble idea, questions

remained over who should be the judge on when to intervene and who should provide the resources for possible interventions. In part due to these challenges, R2P failed to prevent mass atrocities in Darfur and more recently war crimes in Syria. This led to R2P largely dropping out of the public conversation leaving the future of human rights enforcement unclear.

Competing Visions

“The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to strong, independent nations”

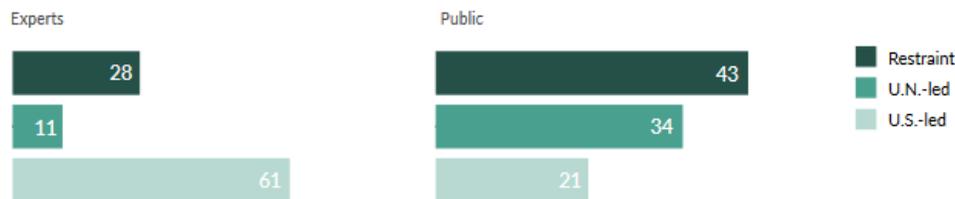
Donald Trump, addressing the U.N. General Assembly in 2019

“The principles of open markets and accountable governance, of democracy and human rights and international law that we have forged remain the firmest foundation for human progress in this century”

Barack Obama, addressing the U.N. General Assembly in 2016

The American public is divided on humanitarian intervention

Expert opinion vs. public opinion on how to respond to humanitarian abuses



Source: EGF

Power is a strong advocate for humanitarian intervention. In 2003, prior to her diplomatic career, she received a Pulitzer Prize for her book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* which examined U.S. responses to 20th century genocides. She argued that American policymakers have been too reluctant to take action against humanitarian crises. A survey conducted by the [Eurasia](#)

[Group](#) in 2019 found that a majority of foreign policy experts agree that the U.S. has a responsibility to take the lead in fighting humanitarian abuses. The American public appears to be more reluctant to support intervention: 43 percent of Americans favor restraint over any kind of intervention and only about one in five Americans back a U.S.-led response.

The partisan split on foreign policy objectives

Republicans and Democrats have very different goals for U.S. foreign policy

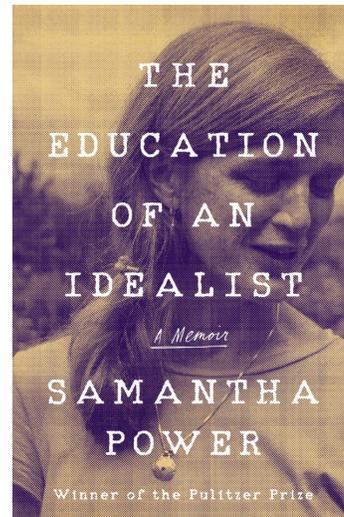
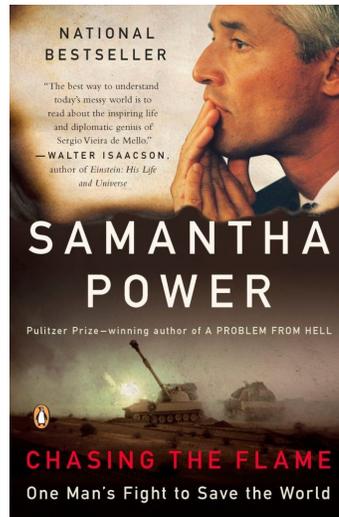
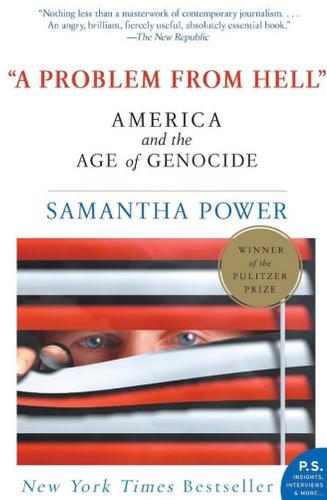
% who say each should be a top foreign policy priority



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 7-16, 2018. PEW RESEARCH CENTER

A 2018 [Pew Research survey](#) indicated that Democrats were more likely to support a diplomacy-centered foreign policy (improving relationships and strengthening the U.N.) while Republicans prioritized increasing military power and reducing American investment in global affairs.

Literature by Samantha Power



Power has authored three books. Her bestseller *A Problem from Hell* (2002), an indictment of U.S. governments' reluctance to humanitarian intervention, was followed by *Chasing the Flame* (2008), a biography of U.N. human rights activist Sérgio Vieira de Mello, and her recently published personal memoir *The Education of an Idealist* (2019).

Samantha Power Outlines Four Premises that Influence Foreign Policy

At a 2018 Boston College colloquium, Power identified four main premises that influence the state of the world: (1) the international community and the importance of U.S. leadership, (2) the rise of China, (3) diplomacy as an essential tool to deal with crises, and (4) domestic polarization. She argues that the fourth premise, domestic polarization, is also the greatest threat to U.S. national security.



Other Perspectives

The Return to Great-Power Rivalry...

In this article for *The Atlantic*, Thomas Wright argues that maintaining a “liberal international order” is no longer the right goal for U.S. foreign policy. Instead, he thinks the U.S. should adopt a “free-world strategy” that focuses on defending liberal democracy in the West, not trying to expand it.



The Trump Doctrine

In *Foreign Policy*, former Trump administration official Michael Anton advocates for an “America First” foreign policy. Focusing solely on our own self-interest is “natural,” he argues, and will initiate a “return to normalcy” after decades of moving toward globalization.



The Nonintervention Delusion

In *Foreign Affairs*, Richard Fontaine from the Center for a New American Security pushes back against the current trend toward military restraint in American politics. He suggests that intervention should remain an option to defend our values and interests on the world stage.



The Miseducation of Samantha Power

Writing for the socialist *Jacobin Magazine*, John Carl Baker from the Ploughshares Fund criticizes Power's “liberal interventionism” as “misdirected righteousness.” He argues that this ideology contributes to militarization and advances a kind of neo-imperialism.



Discussion Questions

Do you agree that global cooperation is a “practical necessity,” like Samantha Power says, or are we better off acting independently without worrying about the interests of other countries?

Can values and idealism really guide U.S. foreign policy or does such an approach make us vulnerable to exploitation by other countries?

Should we make a diplomatic effort to improve relations with long-standing adversaries like Iran, North Korea, and Cuba? Or should we show strength in order to intimidate them?

Does the U.S. have a responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocities, even if these are happening at the other end of the world? Or do such interventions just lead to more messy conflicts that we shouldn't have a stake in?

Do you agree with Power's statement that domestic polarization is the greatest contemporary threat to U.S. national security?

This classroom resource guide is provided by WorldOregon and designed to encourage discussion about subjects related to Samantha Power's talk at the 2020 International Speaker Series. The guide is meant to be purely informative; WorldOregon does not endorse any views or opinions expressed in it.



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With thanks to the following organizations for resources used:

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