

ROGER

PETERSEN:

Welcome, everybody to today's MIT Starr Forum, entitled "Grand Illusion-- The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East." We're honored to have with us today the author of *Grand Illusion*, Steve Simon. And joining us as the moderator will be Andrew Bacevich. I'm Roger Petersen, I teach [AUDIO OUT] I've just recently come back from Baghdad, where I was participating in an event discussing the state of Iraq 20 years after the US invasion.

The Center for International Studies had its own event on that topic where Steve Simon, Marsin Alshamary, and I were panelists. Today's event is going to be different, I think. It's going to be much broader than the previous event. It's going to cover an entire region in a longer time period. It should also bring up some thorny questions about US policymaking in general.

The title, you could rephrase it as "Deluded American Ambition." Where does that ambition come from? How is it sustained? Is deluded ambition embedded within American politics and culture? Can it be calibrated? I see we have some prominent MIT International relations scholars in the audience so I hope we can have a good debate about some of those questions.

Before we get started, I'd like to thank the MIT Center for National Studies, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, and the MIT Press Bookstore, the sponsor of today's event. I also want to mention that we have time for Q&A at the end of the talk. We'll be taking questions from both the webcast audience and the live audience. For those of you in the audience, you'll notice there's two mics, and you can line up behind the mics in the Q&A pattern. That will work.

Finally, today's talk is the title of Steve Simon's newly released book. His book is available for purchase at 20% discount here at the event. I think for introducing this, I should get a 100% discount on the book, but I'll have to talk to Steve about that. For those on webcast, you can email the MIT Press Bookstore at books@MIT.edu. And we're going to have some time at the end for a book signing. Steve will be up on the stage and signing books right here.

And now let me introduce to you our featured guest. The speaker is Steve Simon. He is the Robert E. Wilhelm Fellow at the MIT Center for International Studies. He's a nonresident senior analyst with the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a think tank based in Washington, DC. He has served on the National Security Council, Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa during the Obama administration, and as the NSC Senior Director for Counterterrorism in the Clinton White House.

These assignments followed a 15-year career at the US Department of State and academic teaching posts. Our moderator is Andrew Bacevich. He is the Professor Emeritus of International Relations and History at Boston University. He co-founded the Quincy Institute and is the Chairman of the Institution's board of directors. He's a graduate of West Point and Princeton. He served in the army before becoming an academic.

Andrew is a author, co-author, or editor of more than a dozen books. His most recent books are *Paths of Dissent-- Soldiers Speak Out Against America's Forever Wars*, that's 2022. And *On Shedding an Obsolete Past-- Bidding Farewell to the American Century*, also in 2022. So please join me in welcoming Steve Simon to the podium.

[APPLAUSE]

STEVE SIMON: Roger, thank you very much for that kind introduction, and to MIT, of course, and the Quincy Institute for pulling this event together. I really appreciate it. I've been asked on a number of occasions, since the book was released, why I wrote it. So let me just start with that very briefly. I'm not going to be talking very long, so don't panic, but this is just kind of a brief intro.

I had actually wanted to write a book about my BA thesis supervisor, a guy named Morton Smith, a fascinating guy. But the literary agent I was dealing with suggested that it might be better as a posthumous project because I'd have plenty of time to work on the details. But for the moment, he suggested that it might be more appropriate to write about something of greater public interest and relevance to more people.

So I said, well, OK, I'd think about it. And the fact was it had occurred to me that US-- that US military intervention in the Middle East seemed to have increased rather a lot when I entered the State Department in Reagan's first term-- Ronald Reagan's first term. And-- excuse me-- it seemed to be fading when I left government at the end of Obama's first term. I left government the first time towards the end of Bush's-- George W Bush's first term. And in between then and Obama, I divided my time between research and consulting in the Persian Gulf.

So I thought then that a memoir, keyed to the long, but anomalous trajectory of intervention-- of US intervention in the Middle East might be the thing to do. I could, I told myself, ask crucial sunset of life questions. What did I do? What did I accomplish? What did it all mean? As you can imagine, this summoned the whole megillah of self-doubt and existential dread. So after an uneven start, I thought, maybe I should leave myself out of the story, except as necessary, and confine my presence to the role of witness and narrator. I was, after all, never confirmed by the Senate for anything, so I didn't want to get carried away.

The book, itself, relies on archival material, and many interviews, and a burgeoning secondary literature. It doesn't reflect-- it doesn't reflect a methodology as such, but it does incorporate insights from history and political science, as it tells what I hope is a well-paced and vivid story. Of course, my memory of things, as experienced by a very different person than the one I am now, had to be wrestled with. The interpretative effort, therefore, entailed introspection, a lot of it painful. John Updike wrote about guilt gems, the things you did that you regret, memories of which are hard, and crystalline, and polished, and stored away, because-- well, they have to be.

It wasn't all tears and flap doodle. Paradoxically, I guess, the research itself was fascinating. I don't think I got bored at any point in the process. And relating my own recollections to those of colleagues and to the archival record was challenging, but it generated a lot of aha moments, as in I'd forgotten this or that or my memory of an event or an action was contradicted, either by the record or by colleagues who were there too and remembered it differently. So on the latter point, there was a bit of Rashomon going on.

This also generated a great deal of scribble, scribble, scribble, which dismayed the editor-- my poor editor, who had to worry, among other things, about how to get all that paper from China in the midst of a supply chain collapse, because the book turned out to be really rather long, but it's still shorter by a third than it was when I submitted the typed script. You can thank my editor for that later.

So in a sense, the book is a sequel to one that I did with my friend and colleague at the Council on Foreign Relations, Ray Takeyh, on the US in the Middle East in the Cold War, when everything came easily for the United States in the Middle East. In the last phase of the Cold War, which is covered in the book, and all the more so in subsequent decades, nothing came easily for the US. With apologies to the renowned historian of Turkey and the Arab world, Bernard Lewis, the big question was, what went wrong?

The book, which attempts to answer this question, can be read on two levels, depending on your interest. As written-- as written, though, these two levels are somewhat intertwined. The one way to read it is as a proverbial insight or account of events as they played out in a parade of administrations, from Jimmy Carter's last year in office to the middle of Joe Biden's first term. The other would be thematically, and these themes, or collectively the grand delusion of the title would be, first, the strange disconnect between the world as it was and the world that policymakers imagined it to be. Second, the powerful impulse to refashion the Middle East through selective democratization and punishment of recalcitrant rulers, mostly by tormenting their populations. Third, the conviction that the US had the sheer power to do these things and make them stick, alongside a weird disregard for the obvious agency of the rulers, and occasionally, peoples who are the object of this policy.

There was a strong family resemblance among these delusions as they were expressed by different administrations of both parties. They fall nicely under the overall rubric of Bush's-- that is George HW Bush's "New World Order." Jimmy Carter's and his Secretary of State, Cy Vance's, ethical foreign policy, to borrow the new labor name for it, prefigured aspects of the concept, as did Reagan's, quote-unquote, "Crusade for Freedom."

In Clinton, it was enlargement, as in the enlargement of democracies, and linked-- and in turn linked to Immanuel Kant and Frank Fukuyama, who had just written *The End of History* when the administration-- the Clinton administration was pulling together the bumper stickers for its foreign policy. In Bush II, it was the "Freedom Agenda." In Obama, it was "democratization," and, subtly, "Responsibility to Protect," until he despaired of it, whereupon the arc of intervention descended rather swiftly under Trump and continued to do so under Biden. I defy you, any of you, to find one word derived from the Greek root *demos*. In the administration's official statement of Middle East policy, which just came out last month, it was articulated by Biden's Middle East coordinator in a speech.

The thing about delusions is that, by definition, they are impervious to correction. That's one of the things that makes them delusions. I'm at pains in the book to show that quite apart from criticism outside of government, which one assumes policymakers would ignore in any event, the intelligence community kept up a steady drumbeat of skeptical corrective analysis-- not always, and not always as compelling as it could have been, but was circulated at senior levels and seemingly ignored.

The other thing about these delusions is that they were overlaid on and blended with pre-existing conditions, if I can put it that way, especially concern for reputation and the considerable role of domestic politics. The upshot was an awful sequence of wars punctuated by rounds of punitive sanctions. Both Brown University and Harvard have attempted to calculate the human and life cycle financial costs of these policies and the ideas animating them. The answer is many hundreds of thousands of human beings and trillions of dollars.

An account of this administration-- as an account of these administrations, the book offers, in some ways-- the book, I would say, differs in some ways from generally held views. Don't get me wrong, this is not a work of thoroughgoing revisionism, but it might contribute to revisionist accounts in the future by scholars. One never knows. But I'll give you a couple of examples.

There was Ronald Reagan's Iran policy, I found that I was enthralled by that. Even if one doesn't accept the idea that the Reagan administration colluded with Iran in 1980 to undermine Carter's re-election prospects, an allegation corroborated recently in *The New York Times*, Reagan's arms transfers to Iran in his first term and the blind eye he turned to Israeli transfers after the US transfers had stopped, reflected in interest in restoring a relationship with Iran following the fall of the Shah.

The CIA in the mid-1980s laid out a serious argument for a tilt away from Iraq, toward Iran. And, of course, the secret arms sales to Iran that featured in the Iran-Contra scandal in Reagan's second term, fit quite nicely into the overall pattern of Reagan's thinking about relations with the Revolutionary regime. It didn't work out, but it fascinates, as I said, and especially so given the unresolved adversarial relationship that persists today, many decades later.

I looked at George Bush's diplomacy before the war, the planning and conduct of the military campaign, Desert Storm, and construction of the sanctions regime, and conclude it was all really rather a mess. Truth in advertising, I was part of the planning process. Saddam was left with a significant military capability, and the US, via the UN, imposed requirements on Iraq that, as a practical matter, would have regarded-- would have required military occupation, or something close to it, to enforce.

But even as the administration was doing this, and encouraging Iraqis to revolt against Saddam, Powell-- Colin Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was pulling US forces out of the theater as fast as he possibly could. George HW Bush partisans say, all this would have worked out well if Bush had had a second term. But his political campaign was even less successful than his military one, so we will never know.

The Clinton administration had little interest in Iraq one way or the other. It was focused on the Balkans and Europe in general, and left Middle East policy in the hands of, I suppose, mid-level-- mid-level officials, and proceeded on automatic pilot, economically pulverizing Iraq, refusing to take yes for an answer on WMD, watching a civil war play out in the Kurdish area, a punitive regime incursion into that area, and a failed US-launched coup attempt.

Elsewhere, the US was excluded from the Oslo Middle East peace process, although it tried to play a constructive role, but failed to regulate the impulses of both sides. And with Rabin's assassination, Clinton's only effective counterpart was that of action. Palestinian terrorism did the rest. Camp David II in Shepherdstown, where the administration and Israelis negotiated with Syrians, ended with recriminations rather than peace, setting the stage for the Second Intifada. Yet, at this point, policymakers still attributed the failure of the peace process to contingent factors-- actually many, and they still do, bad luck and trouble, kind of like a Delta Blues version of the State Department's multi-volume Foreign Relations of the United States, rather than systemic factors that set the conditions for these contingencies.

My concerns in the Bush II chapter were threefold. One was to isolate the fundamental-- and I mean in a sense-- the real war justification and war aim out of the welter of claims emerging from the administration. This involved assessing the effect of 9/11 on the administration's calculations. I'm not at all sure I succeeded, to be honest, but the rest of the book is really good.

The second was not so much to exculpate the younger Bush, but make the case that had the elder Bush not entangled the US in Iraq in the way he did, it is very unlikely that Iraq would have been in George W Bush's gun sight on September 12, 2001. I know this smacks of post-- ergo propter hoc argument, but readers can judge for themselves whether they think it holds water. The third objective was to tie together how the administration's military strategy and approach to occupation spurred a civil war and sectarianized Iraq state and society.

Obama's first term was the beginning of the end of the grand delusion. It started with the peace process lobby and democratization enthusiasts shaping policy options for Obama, and ended with the predictable collapse of the peace process, the manifest inability to influence the course of the Arab Spring, and an immense arm and train effort in Syria that probably prolonged the war, but of course, without changing the outcome. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear deal with Iran, was a different, happier story, but there wasn't a durable constituency for it in the United States. And the rest is history, I guess.

The Trump and Biden chapters explore beginnings of a post grand delusion era and an in-depth take on the altered relationships in this era, between the US and Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. I'm going to stop there. This was supposed to be an appetizer, not the main meal. So I guess I'm just going to hand it over to Professor Bacevich.

**ANDREW
BACEVICH:**

Well, Steve said that he intended to produce a well-paced and vivid story. I can assure you he has. And I can also tell you, you got a glimpse of the wit-- in his presentation, a glimpse of the wit that is woven into this narrative in this just absolutely terrific book. And it pleases me to no end to have a chance to have this discussion.

So I'm going to pose a handful of questions. I hope they're softballs, so he can grab hold of them and run in whatever direction he wants to. And then when I've finished, in 15 minutes or so, then we'll invite questions from you all and from the online audience.

Steve, you write, toward the end of the book, quoting now, "America's overriding purpose in the Middle East had been to secure two states, Israel and Saudi Arabia." And especially since 9/11, at least as I observed things, "The US has often articulated its aims in terms of spreading freedom and democracy." You made some allusions to that with Reagan, for example.

So my question is, has all of that talk been so much eyewash? To what degree has ideology actually figured as a component of US policy in the Middle East?

STEVE SIMON:

I think the answer is yes and no. Just to take the second part of the question first, it's a truism, really, when we look at American foreign policy, that it's-- that moral values, the ideological component, I think, that you're referring to, is thought of as just lipstick applied to the pig of strategic interest. So American people seem to like that. It makes those policies perhaps more durable politically. So let's dish it out.

I think it's deeper than that because it's a facet of American exceptionalism, which is sort of the root ideology, I suppose. And I do think that the presidents-- I'm not really thinking about Trump in this regard because I think he's an outlier, but I think these presidents would have said, well, they really did believe-- they really did believe that stuff. And I think Reagan is-- you just can't deny the conviction with which he delivered these justifications for US policy, especially in a Cold War context, which was weighted with ideological-- I don't know-- contestation.

And I think the same for really all of them, except for Trump. Now I'm not-- on Israel and Saudi Arabia, and US objectives and all that, I think up to a certain point-- and it's still framed in this way-- the US commitment to Israel is intended-- is presented as blending values and strategy. And this was a consequence-- a very interesting period. This was a consequence of Israelis and the United States, for their own respective reasons, decided that it would serve their respective interests if the relationship, which had hitherto been seen as a moral commitment by the United States, include a strategic commitment. And for the Israelis, that was a welcome-- a welcome change because it promised more assistance, I think.

ANDREW BACEVICH: Let me press you just a little bit. And I would like you to talk a little bit about the impact of the 1967 war in this context. I'm not the expert here, but my general sense is that prior to the Six Day War, while there was a moral commitment on the part of successive administrations-- Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and then Johnson-- there was a moral commitment to support the existence of Israel, that commitment did not manifest itself in particularly tangible ways-- and the issue here is weapons, that there was a reluctance on the part of the United States to provide substantial military support. And that all changed after 1967, at least that's the story that I hear. Why did '67 have that-- if it did, why did it have that pivotal impact on official US attitudes with regard to supporting Israel?

STEVE SIMON: Well, Kennedy had already sold Hawks--

ANDREW BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: --to Israel because of the evolving Cold War context. So it wasn't quite just after '67 that things changed and Johnson acquiesced in the sale of A4 Skyhawk aircraft.

ANDREW BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: Yes, things were headed in that direction, but I don't think that there was ever a question that the United States would have intervened to secure Israel's survival in the case of an extremist threat. I can't-- I can't imagine Eisenhower sitting by and watching something really terrible and possibly lethal directed against-- directed against Israel. So I just want to make that clear because it's a contested point among historians.

ANDREW BACEVICH: But is it not the case-- I don't want to go down this rabbit hole too far, but is it not the case that even in the 1950s, the evaluation of the military balance in the Middle East on the part of American agencies, like the CIA, like the Pentagon, was that-- I'll use a slightly inflammatory word here-- that the Arab threat to Israel was exaggerated, or to put it another way, that Israeli military capacity was far greater than it appeared if you were counting up numbers-- and soldiers and numbers of tanks on both sides?

In other words that the assumption-- maybe I'm way off-- the assumption within, for example, the Eisenhower administration was that Israel was fully capable of defending itself, and therefore, that extremist scenario was not likely.

STEVE SIMON: It was low probability, to be sure. I think, look, the '56 Suez campaign demonstrated to everyone, especially to Eisenhower that maybe the Israelis were too strong, I think was his-- was his view, certainly too aggressive.

ANDREW Right.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: But, yeah, '56 showed that the Israelis were-- held the upper hand. You could argue that was already evident in the second half of the War of Independence, after the truce in June 1948. But, yes, I don't think-- and I believe the same to be true in the case of Saudi Arabia-- that there was an existential threat to Israel. And there wasn't one to Saudi Arabia.

But the US, in respect of both, did some hedging. And if you look at the archival material relating to Forrestal and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the very late 1940s, early 1950s, their big concern was that they'd have to go and bail Israel out of a military crisis, when, in their view, there were bigger fish to fry. So whether one thinks that the United States-- that the White House would have been interested in doing any such thing, certainly the Joint Staff thought that the White House would do that. And I think they were thinking realistically.

But anyway, in the event, the Israelis shaped up militarily pretty well.

ANDREW Yeah.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: And we're able to do what they wanted pretty much in Jordan and also vis-a-vis Syria before '67. But I wanted to flesh this point out just a teeny-- just a teeny bit.

ANDREW Go for it.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: OK? Whereas, you can make arguments one way or another prior to-- about military balance prior to '67 and the risk of serious challenges to the Saudis or to the Israelis, I think you'd have to concede, or one would have to concede that certainly by the end of the Cold War, the threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia, to the extent that it ever existed, was much--

ANDREW Diminished.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: --diminished. And that was-- that was a good thing. But the irony, of course, is that at the very moment when those threats did diminish, and to channel Simeon and the Gospel of Luke, the United States could have said, now, let us now thy serve and depart in peace. Just at that moment, George HW Bush chose to entangle the United States in Iraq.

ANDREW Right

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: So the United States had accomplished its two core objectives a very long time ago, but at that very moment, a tangential interest.

ANDREW
BACEVICH: Let's talk about George HW Bush. In your presentation, you suggested that Desert Storm wasn't all it was cracked up to be, or at least you suggested that Colin Powell's haste to pull the US troops out was ill considered, that actions by the administration subsequent may have been ill considered. If we would poll our fellow citizens about the greatest American military victory since 1945, I'm guessing that the great majority of them would say, aha, Operation Desert Storm, that's when we won the big victory. Why is it that-- and I, myself, am skeptical about that claim, but why does that claim of Desert Storm being a great victory, why does it--

STEVE SIMON: Why does it ring hollow, I mean, to me?

ANDREW
BACEVICH: Or why does it-- why do we buy it? Why do why do the American people think that it was a great victory, when as you suggested, it actually was a substantial step into the morass?

STEVE SIMON: Yeah, the Bush administration had great press. They had great press. And their self-presentation was impeccable. And you have to think of the theater of it, I mean the performative aspect of the George HW Bush administration was really something.

ANDREW
BACEVICH: Yeah. Powell was magnificent.

STEVE SIMON: And Powell was magnificent. George HW Bush's posture, bearing, and tailoring was riveting.

ANDREW
BACEVICH: And Schwarzkopf knew how to recite his lines.

STEVE SIMON: Absolutely, and he was, as my grandmother would have said, a real bulvan. Anyway, yeah, so I think that went a long way to creating the impression. But also, there was this powerfully felt need to exorcise the ghost of Vietnam.

ANDREW
BACEVICH: Big time.

STEVE SIMON: And I think the war was-- the war was put to that purpose. And it would have failed in that purpose. if it was seen as less than fully-- less than fully effective. But there was a problem in the war plan, in that it was based on bad assumptions about the strength of Iraqi resistance.

ANDREW
BACEVICH: And there was substantial miscues in execution.

STEVE SIMON: As a result.

ANDREW
BACEVICH: Yeah, right.

STEVE SIMON: Because the Pentagon calculated the resistance to be-- likely to be very tough.

ANDREW Right.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: And US casualties likely to be very high. There was an alternative view, and I was part of presenting that alternative view to my superiors, who shared them with the Pentagon. And it caused a little bit of a kerfuffle because I'd spent time down in Maxwell Air Force Base with a guy who was--

ANDREW Warden.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: John Warden, worked on the air campaign. And we applied the latest and greatest mathematics that I learned from Bill Kaufmann-- he was a famous military analyst and consultant to the Pentagon-- to show that the US forces are going to go through the Iraqis like a hot knife through butter. And that's, of course, exactly what happened. But because there was an expectation that the campaign would take longer than it actually did, the hammer didn't quite meet up with the anvil where it had to, and three Republican guard divisions got away to fight another day.

ANDREW Right. Let's-- one of the-- the tone of the book, I would say, with regard to senior policymakers is one of critical
BACEVICH: empathy. There is no shortage of criticism in this book with regard to aspects of US policy. But nonetheless, it seems to me, and you correct me if I'm misreading it, it seems to me that your overall attitude toward the policy makers, the people making decisions, is one of empathy. Why? Why cut them any slack when they screw up?

STEVE SIMON: Well, yeah-- well, *The Washington Post* review of the book reacted to it in exactly the opposite way. They said I was cruel and unfair to people when I said bad things about them. So I suppose mileage varies. But I'm sort of sympathetic to the Mutazilites-- it was like a medieval Muslim school of theology. And they basically said, if there's a malefactor, you don't really know if he's a believer or an apostate. You can't know that because really only Allah knows that.

ANDREW Right.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: So there was sort of a different category of-- that was applied to them, that was invented by the Mutazilis. And I think there's a lot to that attitude. Needless to say, they didn't fare very well. And they're kind of a-- I don't know-- it's an epithet now, more than anything else. But I think it was a very admirable way of looking at things. And that's sort of how I look at it.

And I sometimes, you can't-- there's no denying what people are thinking because they will say things in a particular context that suggests that's what they really think. And an example of that would be Madeleine Albright in 1996, when she was interviewed by *Newsweek* magazine. The interviewer said, well, US policy in Iraq has-- there just been a UN agency report on casualties. They said-- 567,000 Iraqi children were killed by sanctions.

So the interviewer says, this is more children than were killed in Hiroshima. What do you think about that? And she-- very thoughtfully, she said, well, I have to say, I think it was worth it. What can one say in response to that? And there-- I know if she's a believer or an apostate, there's no-- there's no middle category.

Or on the other hand, a very senior official in the Obama administration one day waved the green folder at me, which that was a folder that had the names of individuals who had been selected for targeting by the people who did selection for targeting. And he said, we're killing too many people. Now, if he were here at this moment, maybe he'd say, well, I thought-- the reason I said that was, well, we're creating more terrorists. But I think there was something else going on in that person's mind. I think there was some serious disquiet.

So how can you-- it's just difficult to condemn people. And it's such a complicated situation. I don't know, you tell me.

ANDREW I guess I'm less-- but, of course, I've never worked in the places you've worked. I'm simply a distant observer.

BACEVICH: And I would confess that I have come to be, over time, really watching this, the narrative you describe-- watching this narrative unfold has made me less empathetic. We don't want to have this be a pick on Madeleine Albright event, but the famous public statement, the claim that we are the indispensable nation, we can see farther into the future, and that this provides a rationale for why the United States can use force, whereas it would condemn the use of force and others.

I mean, I don't know how many times I've quoted that statement. And I do because I know she was an accomplished, intelligent woman, a patriot through and through, but to me that sort of thing is just so utterly preposterous that it pollutes public discourse. And also, quite frankly, plays to all the wrong instincts of our countrymen, who want to be told that we are the indispensable nation, or that we are the exceptional nation, that we are the chosen nation.

And again, I'm only say this as an outsider-- nobody ever had me come into the Oval Office and-- well, one time, but basically never. Just that language strikes me as so corrupting that I find it hard to be empathetic in rendering judgment in retrospect by the people who said those things.

STEVE SIMON: But it goes back to Jonathan Edwards. I mean, it's--

ANDREW It does indeed.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: It's so deeply rooted.

ANDREW It is. But I mean-- no question about it, and yet, does that give us reason to reinforce it? Or should it not require

BACEVICH: us-- I say us-- what I really mean is people in the public arena-- does it not require people in a public arena to push back against those claims? To push back against American exceptionalism, because-- again, one guy's opinion-- those sort of notions have caused great damage to our country and to other people as well? I don't know-- I'm just-- I'm less empathetic, that's all. We should go on, because we're going to have to-- I'm going to ask one more question and then we'll let folks weigh in with their own.

The subtitle refers to the rise and fall of American ambition. And you talked about the fall-- but I want-- I'd like you to reflect a little bit on where the fall leaves us today. What do you see as the likely trajectory of US policy in the region going forward? Or another way of posing the same question, I think, is how would you define actual existing US strategic interests in the region at this very moment?

STEVE SIMON: Oh, well--

ANDREW And take all the time you want.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: That's no problem. I think we need to start by distinguishing-- I don't know if this is a valid scholarly argument. I'm shooting from the hip. But I think we need to distinguish between national interest and strategic interest. And the United States has a lot of national interests. In Israel, for example, you could argue that there's no strategic benefit, but a lot of Americans think that US support for Israel is really important for a whole bunch of reasons.

And you hear the same things said, say, of the Kurds. Where it exists, support for humanitarian interests, operations, or expenditure of resources, well, people might say, well, that's in our national interest, even if it doesn't have a strategic effect.

I think our-- our strategic interest at this point is in not letting our national interests compromise our strategic interests by driving intervention that doesn't serve those interests. Is that--

ANDREW Here's what I heard you say. That our national interests now are served by, relatively speaking, a policy of restraint. I would add, parenthetically, because a policy of restraint offers a possibility of healing our internal-- interior wounds. And therefore, restraint abroad provides the opportunity for that healing to take place. Or to flip it over, yet another invasion of Iraq would cause mayhem domestically, and arguably, further undermine our democracy. Is that kind of what you were getting at?

STEVE SIMON: Well, first, I actually agree with you, but it's not exactly what I was getting at. But that's my fault because I was having trouble putting the point across. But I'm going to take another stab at it. But just more telegraphically, the US strategic interest is in maintaining-- trying to maintain a certain degree of stability in the region so that tumult there doesn't spur knee jerk reactions here at home that drive renewed intervention.

OK, so you might think, well, perhaps it's best-- our strategic interests might be best served by simply drawing down even further than we have, and we have mostly drawn down from the region. But I think that's probably not tenable. And in fact, it's dangerous, because then if something happens, that incites a strong political reaction, drawing on this national interest thing.

So, for example, ISIS comes back, and they do some terrible things, as they did in 2014, the United States will be driven, I think, to intervene in Iraq. The Iraqis will ask us to, and we will say yes. And there will be strong political backing, I think, for such a thing. Well, if you want to avoid that scenario, you need to, at a minimum, not be seen as having abandoned that field to a group like ISIS.

And there will be those who say, well, we spent so much blood and treasure in Iraq, how can we let it devolve in some kind of awful way? We need to go back. Well, it doesn't serve our strategic interest really to go back. It becomes a really political issue. So the way to obviate that outcome is to assist the Iraqis and other states as best the United States can to keep ISIS suppressed.

ANDREW With a modest-- with a modest investment, a modest presence.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: Well, yeah, you'd probably do with less than we have there now. But right now, I would say there's a modest investment.

ANDREW Well, thank you for that. And we should invite folks in the audience here to pose any questions. There are mics on the left and right side. And I think I've been told to invite questioners to use one of the mics. And sir, you were first. We'll go left, right, left, right. So you're second, OK?

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Sure.

AUDIENCE: Good afternoon. My name is Kyle William Marston with *The Daily Show* with Desi Lydic. Hey, Steven, I have to ask this question verbatim or I'll get in trouble in New York. As someone who is both passively in academia--

ANDREW Hang on a sec, you're from *The Daily Show*?

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Yup.

ANDREW You mean like the TV thing? Do you guys have that in Iraq? I don't know.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: Well, I'm not in Iraq, but--

AUDIENCE: You were recently.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

ANDREW Steve--

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Yeah, that was--

ANDREW OK, all right.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: That was in Egypt.

ANDREW Forgive me for interrupting. Go ahead and pose your question.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: As someone who is both passively in academia at Louisiana State University and actively as an intern with a US embassy in Libya, I spent my entire 20s engaged in this grand delusion-- thanks, Obama-- I want to know what I should tell the next generation of Americans, who want to play positive roles in our foreign policy, but don't want to end up like me-- 33 a Rex Tillerson-- sorry-- a Rex Tillerson State Department relic, and *The Daily Show's* first diabetic correspondent, and the only one who can say [NON-ENGLISH] Just tell me what I'm supposed to tell the kids.

STEVE SIMON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, no comment. So advice, a low-sugar diet, I think, is key here. Look, from a strategic perspective, I don't know, I'd say you want to vote for people who have a disciplined and relatively narrow conception of core US interests, strategic interests, the things you'd fight for. And that we should stick to our knitting. We have a lot of work to do at home.

AUDIENCE: Read the book?

STEVE SIMON: Oh, yes, and-- yes, and take two every day and drink plenty of fluids.

ANDREW Sir, please.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Sure, my name is Kenneth Oye. I'm a professor of International Relations here at MIT. My question really centers on a problem. We have many problems in the region. But I'm looking to the destruction of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action by the last administration and what should happen now.

It's a Boston question. We have Ernie Moniz, John Kerry, Wendy Sherman, and others that negotiated that agreement. But it was torn up by the last administration. Israel, obviously, is making a big deal of the possibility of acquisition of nuclear weapons. And it's a flashpoint. It's a potential danger. But what do you recommend that we do?

STEVE SIMON: So I'm actually-- I'm actually not sure I caught all of that, but is the gist where do we go with the JCPOA?

AUDIENCE: OK, it's gone.

STEVE SIMON: Yeah.

AUDIENCE: So what should we do now?

ANDREW Well, but it's--

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Understanding--

ANDREW Excuse me, sir. You're assuming it's gone and cannot be revived.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: No, I'm not assuming that it can't be revived, I'm just noting that it certainly was spiked by the last administration. Efforts to resurrect have not succeeded yet.

STEVE SIMON: Well, the US options at this point are pretty limited. The United States-- well, all the interlocutors-- the P5+1, they tabled a draft in late August. And it was rejected by the Iranians. And it was a draft that had, hitherto, been approved by the Iranian delegation, presumably with the consent of the government in Tehran. That left the United States really bereft of good options.

The Iranians now-- the Iranians have the wind in their sails, or they perceive themselves to because of their relationship with China and Russia. And they're very serious about that. Those aren't just talking points. And I think they feel themselves pretty much immune to a serious response to increased enrichment on the part of-- on the part of their government and the nuclear program. So that's kind of a prescription for trouble.

The Israelis, for their part, they talk about not being ready yet to deal with the nuclear threat, the Iranian nuclear threat militarily. They emphasize that yet. And I'm sure they're working on options. Right now, it wouldn't be all that practical for them to do anything. And they seem to have acquiesced in enrichment at 60%, with the resulting stockpiling. And I think what would be sensible for the United States to do now, but you could-- I want to say, I'm not-- I'm not the fool this would make me seem to be, but I think the United States should go to the Chinese.

AUDIENCE: Yes.

STEVE SIMON: And say, listen, we really think you did-- that was fantastic what you did with Iran and Saudi Arabia, really, really admirable, and we want to work with you on this, because we have strong ties in the region, and so on, and we need to put some meat on the bones here. So why don't we use the leverage that you've cultivated in Tehran to get them to devolve their stockpiles onto other parties, and to back away from even 60%, and go back to the levels envisaged in the JCPOA.

AUDIENCE: Right.

STEVE SIMON: And there are things that can be done now, possibilities that have been opened up that didn't exist before because of the Chinese.

AUDIENCE: Steven, that actually was the follow up on that. If you look to the Chinese mediation effort, the mutual recognition that's taken place, it's been viewed with consternation by many within the American foreign policy establishment. But this may be good news. And you're starting on that. Are there other points you might make on the grand delusion fading a more multipolar world, you listening, and our rival, China, playing a constructive role?

STEVE SIMON: [INAUDIBLE].

ANDREW BACEVICH: Sir, you're up.

AUDIENCE: Yes. Hi, my name is Pouya. I teach Middle East history here at MIT, modern Middle East history. So a lot of what you discussed today is right in my wheelhouse. I'm a little bit excited. So please allow me to give you a historian's question, which means there's going to be a bit of commentary to create the context behind this question.

ANDREW BACEVICH: It will be brief, though, right?

AUDIENCE: As brief as I can be. You spoke about the first Persian Gulf War and the creation of Bush's "New World Order." My question is that there was a meeting that Saddam had with the US ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie. And he asked her about what would be the American-- what's the American point of view, given this dispute that Iraq has with Kuwait? And April Glaspie, after, conferring with the State Department, basically said that we don't have an opinion on this. We consider this an inter-area of dispute.

Now some have argued-- historians have argued that this was America basically giving the green light to Saddam to create the ruse to have an American military presence in the Persian Gulf, at the time when the Soviet Union was collapsing it was an opportunity to expand our footprint. And this goes back into the Iranian revolution and the withdrawal of British forces east of the Suez in 1968, when Nixon then met with Iran during the period of the monarchy, and asked the Shah to be the guardian of the Persian Gulf region, the world's main oil corridor.

And he gladly accepted that position until the Iranian revolution changed that calculus. And the idea being that the collapse of the Soviet Union created this opportunity for the United States to be its own policeman in the Persian Gulf region. I just wanted to know your thoughts on that. Thank you.

STEVE SIMON: Well that about Ambassador Gaspie, you could really say three things. First is that the Bush administration was sending very mixed signals to Baghdad in the preceding period. The overall thrust to the Bush administration's policy towards Iraq was to maximize trade because the Midwestern states, the farm states, they wanted to sell farm stuff-- grain. And Iraq needed a lot of it. And the US was going to subsidize the sale. Hence, Bob Dole's-- he was a Senator from Kansas, a very important man-- hence, his trip to Iraq during that period.

And there was a National Security decision directive issued by the Bush administration which emphasized the importance of cultivating trade relations with Iraq. And the United States was generally disinclined to do anything to get in the way, which would include a punitive response, for example, to the attack against Halabja during the Anfal Campaign. So I think-- and at the same time, we were putting pressure on Saddam because of-- for proliferation reasons. So I'm not sure that the Iraqis really understood what it was we wanted or were up to.

The second thing is that Gaspie, she hadn't seen Saddam yet. This was her-- this was her first meeting with Saddam. And the thing is that Saddam insisted on having the meeting within less than 24 hours. And if you take into account the time differences, there was no way that embassy Baghdad could have gotten guidance from Washington in time for Ambassador Gaspie's meeting. So there you have one of the accidents of history. So Ambassador Gaspie did the only thing an ambassador could do under those circumstances, which is take the latest guidance and you read from the cable. That's what you do.

The last thing I would say is it didn't matter at that one way or another what Gaspie would have said or not said. Saddam was ready to roll. And it was pretty clear that he was ready to roll by just an assessment of the disposition of Iraqi forces, especially its armor at that moment, which the Defense Intelligence Agency was busy doing. And they judged that it was going to happen and happen imminently. So it was a really interesting story, and it seems like it was really consequential and world historical, but actually, it was--

ANDREW Isn't the--

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: --kind of not too important.

ANDREW Isn't the-- isn't the fourth thing you would say--

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: Sorry?

ANDREW Isn't the fourth thing you would say about that incident is that she was shamelessly scapegoated for domestic
BACEVICH: political purposes.

STEVE SIMON: It was completely atrocious what they did to her.

ANDREW All right.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

ANDREW Are we-- are you giving us questions from--

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: This is an online question.

ANDREW --online audience.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: So the US invests a lot in the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia, but seems increasingly unable to get them to follow our policy preferences. Why is it that the supposedly junior partners in these relationships appear to be in control?

STEVE SIMON: Aha! Harrumph! Am I given to understand that-- yeah. Well, they both have-- both countries have very substantial constituencies in the United States. And it's just-- I'm not really sure how much more there is to say. That sort of support within the United States, which is widespread, not just-- in the case of Saudi Arabia, it's widespread in, I would say, economic elite in the United States, but also in the realm of higher education and other sectors, where the Saudis have been very significant donors. The relationship with the United States throws off a lot of cash. So I think that's worth remembering.

And there's a lot of support, as we've alluded to, out there in the US public, especially among Jewish Americans and Evangelical Americans. So that's-- I think that pretty much explains why these countries can, I suppose, diss the United States or ignore US wishes. I think they can be fairly confident that would not put at risk the benefits that they do get on the strategic side from the relationship with the United States.

And I'll add one more thing-- Iran. Iran's a major factor here. And if-- the US is in a kind of a bind with respect to Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. Because as long as Iran professes-- and is, actually, a threat to Israel, certainly, then the United States is going to be concerned to contain Iran. And that's going to keep the United States there, I think. And I think our allies understand that, even if they think that it's maybe necessary, but not sufficient.

ANDREW Cody, do you have a question?

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: I have a--

ANDREW Or are you taking photos?

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: No, I have a question.

ANDREW Shoot.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: Steve, I wanted to ask you about your recollections and thoughts on the Arab Spring. Now the United States, beyond its interventions in the Middle East, also believed that stability was a cornerstone of their policy, and so you cozy up to dictators and challenging regimes. But the Arab Spring blew open that dam. And I was wondering if you could talk about the role of people, populations in relations to these autocrats. And moving forward, do you feel like the United States government learned lessons on how to engage the region beyond just autocrats? I'm not too optimistic when I look at Egypt now, so I was wondering what your thoughts were on that.

STEVE SIMON: Well, those are two questions. On the engagement side of things, people to people stuff, or government to people, the United States was doing so much of that in Egypt that the Egyptians finally got so upset that they took the son of the US Transportation Secretary hostage in what was a troubling and-- it was a vexing moment in US-Egyptian relations until the young man was freed. And then the United States got the signal that you really-- you have to stop pushing. So that is to say, stop engaging with Egyptian civil society.

So there was a lot of that. And if you read, as I have not, but if you read Wikileaks, and you look at the cables regarding Syria, you can get a good sense of the degree to which the United States was working with Syrian civil society prior to the revolution of 2011 in that country. So I think it's a mistake to think that the United States hadn't been engaging.

And the other part of your question, the United States had very limited options during the Arab Spring because there's always money for bombing stuff, but there's-- the Congress would not appropriate anything for the Arab Spring Fund, contingency fund that was established by the administration. So there was no there, there. There was no scratch.

ANDREW BACEVICH: We're going to run short of time, so I'm going to ask Professor Van Evera to pose a question. And then before you answer, let's ask Professor Posen to pose a question. And then, Steve, you can wrap up with those two questions and any concluding comments that you'd like to make, OK?

STEVE SIMON: Yeah, sure.

So I'm Steve Van Evera from the MIT political science department. I want to ask you a biggie question, and add it up question. I always tell my students in my foreign policy class that evaluating policy is sort of first order of business. You should spend time on it when you study US policy. So how would you evaluate, overall, the impact of US policy, A, on the Middle East, and B, on US interests. And cut it up any way you want, but if you want to start like after the Cold War, just take all the exciting things that happened afterward.

Would the Middle East be better off if the US had stayed home? Would it be worse off if the US had stayed home? And you can add another counterfactual, which is, what if it had done even more? We had some really fun [INAUDIBLE] there, with the exciting fireworks. The US did some deals, like Iran. We supported some wars, like the Yemen War.

If you add it all up, the US waged a war in Afghanistan, fought al-Qaeda, defeated al-Qaeda, actually. If you add it all up, would the region be better off if the US had stayed home? Would the US be better off, both in terms of security and any other values you want to put, human rights, you name it.

ANDREW Very clearly stated. Barry.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: So I guess I'm going to be a little bit sardonic here. But--

ANDREW Be sardonic and brief.

BACEVICH:

AUDIENCE: I'm trying to figure out the subtitle of the book, *The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*. Because as I try and code and track the answers you've given to the questions here, you do not leave me confident that United States ambitions in the Middle East have fallen. You lead me to believe that maybe they're in hibernation, maybe they're somewhat reduced, but I don't really see them as fallen.

And when I look at the overall ideological architecture of the Biden administration's grand strategy, it seems to me that most of the pressures that you talk about as having a local influence in the Middle East are still there writ large in our grand strategy. So I guess I'm just going to ask the question again, is fall really the right word for the subtitle of this book?

ANDREW OK. OK. You got the floor.

BACEVICH:

STEVE SIMON: All right, so first, to Professor Van Evera, I'm just quite skeptical about the net effect of US involvement in the Middle East in the period covered in the book, this period of intensified military intervention because I think you have to judge these things by their results. OK, so the United States intervened in Lebanon-- well, Lebanon's a mess. I'm not saying that the United States' intervention caused Lebanon to be a mess, I'm just saying, well, that we did intervene, and it's a mess.

Libya, we intervened twice, under Reagan and under Obama. It's-- it is what it is. In Iraq, I think you'd have to ask those-- I don't know, 576,000 children who aren't alive adults today whether they thought the United States had a positive effect in Iraq or it didn't. They-- they'd probably be on that, well, maybe not so much side of that question.

Where the United States, I suppose, you could say has been successful in a way, is in achieving its objectives of healthy, and prosperous, and safe Israel and Saudi Arabia. But as we were discussing earlier, that state of affairs had been achieved decades ago, long before the United States intervened in Iraq in 2003, for example.

So on the whole, I don't know, I'd have to scratch my head and think, was there really any net positive? And in the book, I do consider this because a lot of people have asked me about it. So I said, well, look, the United States did spend a lot of money for humanitarian purposes and budget support for countries that weren't doing well and project support for countries that weren't doing well. So I think the United States has to get some credit for that.

I think there was a good faith effort on the part of successive administrations to bring peace between Israelis and Arabs. And some would say, well, Camp David I, which put in train an Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, was a pretty big achievement. It's debated, for reasons that we won't go into now, but nevertheless, one could make that-- one could make that claim. Efforts that were made afterward, well, the administration gets an A for effort.

And lastly, there was the JCPOA, which I think was a serious achievement. It's just-- a truly complex multilateral negotiation like that, just as a technical diplomatic matter, it's astounding. And it did it really-- it did a really good thing strategically for the United States, and also for the stability of the region, in my view. OK, so that, I'd say are-- maybe that's the plus side.

ANDREW BACEVICH: So let's wrap up with Barry's question, which as I understand it is, looking at the present moment of US policy, has anything really changed?

STEVE SIMON: So, I think so. Where's Barry? Oh, there he is. Yeah, I think so. What I argue in the book is that Iran could pull the United States back in militarily. That's hanging out there. And whether that happens because the Israelis move first and then we're pulled in, or we decide that since the Israelis are going to go, and we really don't want them involved in this, we just do it, that's a possibility.

And there's all-- I don't know what the state of thinking now is about whether inadvertent escalation exists as a category or it's just a complete fiction, like a frictionless plane or something. But you could get escalation that isn't-- I think, that isn't entirely intended by either side. It came very close under Trump with the killing of Qassem Soleimani. Because-- and this was the astonishing thing about it to me-- because the administration had to have taken into consideration the possibility, even likelihood, of Iranian retaliation. And they could not have known in advance that they were going to get lucky in that the retaliatory strike would not kill anyone. It severely hurt a few people, but it didn't kill anyone.

So Trump was, therefore, in a position to say, well, then it stops here. We're not going to retaliate for what they did because no one was killed. That was all just pure dumb luck. So when you look at a contingency like that, you have to say, well, there's a risk of escalation that isn't really planned. And that's-- that could be very-- that could be very dangerous.

But otherwise, this is Lincoln. I think the United States has drawn down, mostly, in Iraq. We have 2,500 soldiers and Marines there, not that many. Most Iraqis never see them. And their numbers are going to diminish. We've got 900 soldiers and Marines in Syria. And that's it.

We maintain our bases, obviously, on the Arab side of the Gulf. And at any one time, you might have 20,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, airwomen, Marines, circulating through those bases, but circulating through them, not permanently based. So I think things have shrunk in the region quite a bit. And given developments in Northern Europe and Eastern Europe, and now in China, it's hard to see the joint staff kind of saying, yeah, lets-- let's pump it up in the Gulf. I certainly don't see that.

ANDREW BACEVICH: We'll get it right this time.

STEVE SIMON: Yeah, really.

ANDREW BACEVICH: I hope you'll join me in thanking Steve for this wonderful presentation.

[APPLAUSE]

And congratulating him on the publication of this terrific book, which again to remind, is for sale at the rear of the auditorium. Steve will be here and be more than happy to sign your copy. I would like to thank you all for attending this event, both physically here and online. Thank the folks from MIT for helping to organize this. Also, my pals from the Quincy Institute, who are helping me out. Thank you and good evening.

[APPLAUSE]

Good job, man.