

Writing the Imperial Script: Philip Zelikow's Recipe for American Power

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Region: [USA](#)

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The rather grating tunes of empire are ringing out again from the orchestra of think tanks and Washington pundits, and alarmism is the key note being struck as Iraq continues its ever assured route to implosion. Do something quickly about the Middle East, says the roughly scribbled score sheet, or instability will spread like a contagion.

Majid Rafizadeh, president of the American Council, has tried warning his listeners and readers that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), sometimes known as ISIS, is a far more dangerous prospect than Al-Qaeda ever could be. "America's rivals have been most assertive, decisive, and conclusive when it comes to preserving their national, geopolitical and strategic interests" (Front Page Magazine, Jul 4). Inflate the enemy, Rafizadeh desperately insists on, in the hope that something will be done.

What balm, then, do we apply to the sores of the region? The most characteristic response, in its schizophrenic combination of imperial sentiment, selective paternalism and scorn, is that of Philip D. Zelikow, director of the Miller Centre of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. In the *New York Times* (Jul 4), he suggested that the US "quarantine" the Middle East.

Zelikow's role in the Bush administration was that of advisor and critic, a quiet, sotto voce Cassandra. If one is going to be doing the game of empire, best not to spoil the pieces with such rash conduct as using torture.

His presence said much of what went wrong in the Bush Administration, be it the calamitous stumbling in foreign policy or glaring conflicts of interest. For one, Zelikow had ties to both Father Bush and his offspring, having been an aide to Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor to George H.W. Bush and then a member of the Bush transitional team in 2001. He was subsequently appointed to the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board after 9/11. None of these would have been problematic but for the fact that he was appointed Executive Director of the 9/11 Commission in November 2003. Critics had some basis for suggesting that the Bush administration was essentially conducting an appendectomy on itself.

Broad strokes are offered in his July 4 contribution to the *New York Times*. While written as an op-ed, it reads like a policy prescription, a memorandum for the State Department courier. And such views are typically voiced from a position of sage and advisor. "Across the Muslim world, this is an age of revolution beyond the experience of any official now living. Hundreds and thousands have died; millions more flee their home."

It is time, he argues, for a new strategy to combat this panoramic violence. Its language is that of imperial emissary and consul, with that rather distasteful sense of selective

engagement. “A conscious, comprehensive new American strategy is needed. It should focus on effective self-rule as the goal across the region – rewarding it where it exists, and helping those areas withstand the maelstrom next to them. Quarantine the chaos, and immunize neighbouring states that can serve as positive contrasts.”

Zelikow’s work, when kept in its own quarantine behind desk and ordered paper, has its highpoints. His collaboration with Ernest May and Richard Neustadt at Harvard did yield a valuable bounty on the way history is distorted in the maze that is policymaking. Fitting, then, that he should have been involved as counsellor to Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, where myths and realities collided with certain fury. He was even termed Rice’s policy “soul mate”, something of an intellectual Virgil without ballast. While doubling up as supporter and opponent of some policies of the Bush administration, notably in the Middle East, there is little doubt that Zelikow was in for the longest of rides.

The most telling feature of the Zelikow corpus is that of beliefs about historical record, the lingering meanings that become the epic tales told outside their specific context. As he has noted in a Miller Centre Report piece (Winter, 1999), “if readers cannot make a connection to their own lives, then a history may fail to engage them at all.” This is history as self-help, as program, not history as examination and meaning. It has the dangers of being framed as a manual, not as a note of interpretation for the cool and distant.

Zelikow’s program of suggestions are mixed. Don’t prop up the current Maliki regime in Iraq with reassuring airstrikes. Let it lie in discomfort in its own very badly made bed – no “replacement regimes” should be entertained. (He ignores mentioning that the bedder was the US-led occupation force.) ISIS will not be able to hold its gains in any case – Zelikow is sure that sectarianism guarantees its own downfall in the end. He is happy to note that “the current extremist groups are mainly fighting one another, not us.” Back Muslim communities who integrate, rather than exclude. “We should seek ways to enlarge their strength and appeal.”

Be wary of Tehran. No working deals. No sweet notes of rapprochement. They are part of the broader regional problem, along with the Assad regime. Be, however, conciliatory and engaging with Kurdistan and Jordan, “bulwarks of relatively successful and tolerant governance.” Fortify and help such regimes, flanked by Sunni extremists and ISIS-held areas. There are good Islamic regimes. Cultivate them.

Other regimes should have the eye of Washington, be it Turkey, with its temptations of Islamic dictatorship finding voice in the Erdogan government; and Egypt, now under the control of Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after a questionable election. Palestinians should be helped to “build the institutions of a state able to govern, if necessary doing so even before defining that state’s scope.” Zelikow, in another notable omission, does not see Hamas in that picture. The suggestion here, as always, is that the Palestinian cause should run with an American-made ball.

This brand of history, which is both script and prescript, is the sort so admirably shredded by Graham Greene in *The Quiet American* (1955), whose Alden Pyle meddles in Vietnamese affairs because of a belief in formulae and programs of institutional reform and “aid”. Bring concepts of modern economy and capitalism to Indochina, and communists are bound to melt away. The nationalists will come around. What Greene did so well to expose was the idea of such revolutions – or counter-revolutions – as managerial conceits. Zelikow falls into

that easiest of traps, assuming that, “Many in the region, craving modern governance and fearing fundamentalist or sectarian rule by force, still look for leadership from the United States.”

This might have something to do with a curiously Hegelian view on the part of various American policy makers, something rife through neoconservatives and liberals before them. Identify the premise, the contradiction, and then resolve it. This is dialectical history, and it is one replete with dangers. Architects are deemed rational agents; wise decisions can be made.

This is almost never the case. While Zelikow does not go the full way with the neoconservative platform, cautioning against a full-scale American intervention in the manner of the Bush administration, he ignores what brought about the basis of any “quarantine” to begin with. In place, he is suggesting patches, band-aids and picking friends from foe.

Zelikow throws in W. B. Yeats for good measure, though a highly abbreviated version – “Mere anarchy is loosed” and then “the worst are full of passionate intensity”. But what is omitted is that vital sense about the centre that does not hold, a centre that took a sound battering when imperial viceroys decided to forge political entities in the name of a “ceremony of innocence” that well and truly drowned. Zelikow should have been true then to what he says now – the quarrel of Islam remains an “internal one”.

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