

4-2011

Introduction: Navigating the Unknown

Melvyn P. Leffler

Jeffrey W. Legro

University of Richmond, jlegro@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications>Part of the [International Relations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Leffler, Melvyn P., and Jeffrey W. Legro. "Introduction: Navigating the Unknown." In *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, 1-12. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

NAVIGATING THE UNKNOWN

Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. Hardly anyone had foreseen this event. When President Ronald Reagan had challenged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in June 1987 “to tear down this wall,” he never anticipated that Berliners themselves would have the opportunity and courage to bring about such dramatic change. We now know that the Wall came down as a result of accidental circumstances, a series of mistaken statements and understandings among officials of the German Democratic Republic. No one had planned for this to happen, and no one had plans to deal with a new landscape that might have been dreamed about but had never been imagined as an imminent possibility.¹

Not all surprises are so benign. On a clear, sunny, beautiful morning in New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, the familiar landscape of American thinking and American living was shattered. Jets, hijacked by terrorists, rammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, into the Pentagon just outside of Washington, and into the countryside in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Flames engulfed the upper floors of the twin towers, and they collapsed inward. Billowing dark smoke belched out of the buildings; dust blackened the sky, turning day into night. Almost three thousand Americans lost their lives. As their loved ones mourned and the nation looked on mesmerized, if not terrified, officials in Washington struggled to provide reassurance and wreak revenge. The looming threat had now become an existential crisis akin to the one produced by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Policymakers now had to plan for a future they had not dared to consider; but looking through a glass darkly, they had to chart strategy in an international landscape clouded

by dust and debris. What was once clear and predictable was now opaque and uncertain.

November 9, 1989, was a dream come true; September 11, 2001, was a nightmare come true. The events of both days stunned U.S. officials. November 9 was a harbinger of a new era of opportunity; although the future was fraught with uncertainty, it seemed likely to be so much better than the past. September 11 was a day of a different sort. It shattered complacency, eradicated myths of invulnerability, and engendered unprecedented fear. America would never be the same, thought many of its leaders. Their fears were heightened and their anxieties magnified when letters laced with anthrax were found in the mail a few weeks later. Some officials were informed, wrongly, that they themselves had been exposed to substances that endangered their lives. Their sense of threat was palpable.² The times were not simply uncertain; they were bleak and portentous.

Understanding the Past, and Looking Forward

This book is an effort to cast light on American strategic planning in uncertain times, both good times and bad times. After 1989, new opportunities and new dangers appeared with unprecedented speed, including the collapse and rise of major powers, the assaults of terrorists, the proliferation of missile technologies and nuclear capabilities, the spread of disease, and the meltdown of financial markets and polar ice caps. U.S. officials had to navigate in these fluid international circumstances. When the Berlin Wall collapsed and the USSR disintegrated, the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton confronted a geopolitical map that had to be completely redrawn. The Soviet Union, major nemesis and focal point of American foreign policy for forty years, disappeared. American policymakers had to reassess threats and opportunities and reexamine goals, priorities, interests, missions, and tactics. What should the United States do in a newly reconfigured international arena?

Twelve years after the Berlin Wall came down, a small group of terrorists assaulted the symbols of America's economic and military power and murdered thousands of innocent civilians. Evacuating the Pentagon, defense officials and the military chiefs watched impotently and fumed. Gone, instantly, was the notion that the "hyperpower" United States had somehow mastered the universe. Now, decision makers faced a new set of dilemmas: How should the United States respond to the new threat of transnational terrorism in a world of porous borders, mobile people, instant communication, and proliferating weapons of mass destruction?

In both cases—when the walls fell—U.S. policymakers had to figure out what kind of world they faced, what type of world they wanted, and how to manage

it, if only they could. Although these were very different events, they involved a similar set of planning challenges, ones that continue to haunt U.S. foreign policy. In this book, we seek to explore how officials went about reconfiguring foreign policy in the wake of events that suddenly and dramatically altered the global arena. We want to interrogate how U.S. leaders mapped strategy when the international landscape was inchoate and dramatically shifting.

Leaders grappled with uncertainty that came in different forms and presented different challenges. They had to evaluate and designate the priority and immediacy of threats. They had to look for new possibilities to further interests. They had to glean the intentions of other important actors, be they allies or potential foes. They had to assess the utility and reliability of international institutions and law. They had to estimate how economic affairs affected security and vice versa. And they had to figure out how domestic politics would shape and be shaped by these elusive circumstances.³ What did U.S. officials do? How well did they do?

To address these matters we have brought together leading scholars and practitioners to recount, analyze, and reflect on how the United States responded to the fall of the walls. They have been asked to tackle the following issues:

- How did U.S. officials and bureaucracies interpret the events surrounding 11/9 and 9/11?
- How did their understanding of these events shape their subsequent thinking and planning for foreign policy or international order? Did they accurately grasp the international landscape they were about to encounter?
- Were they successful in conceptualizing and implementing their policies?
- What factors accounted for their success or failure? What lessons can be derived for meeting future challenges in making foreign policy in uncertain and shifting strategic circumstances?

The aim of this book is to extrapolate from the aftermath of the most dramatic events in recent international history for the purposes of improving strategic thinking and strategic planning. Managing uncertainty is a challenge that will not go away. In his inaugural National Security Strategy statement, President Barack Obama reminded the American people that in a new century “whose trajectory is uncertain,” the United States “must be ready to lead once more.”⁴

What We Thought We Knew

For the most part, journalists, historians, and scholars of international relations have not looked kindly on the making of U.S. strategy and the practice of U.S.

diplomacy in the post–Cold War era, an era that began with carefully managed euphoria that morphed into a benign indifference to most matters international, an apathy that was punctured only by the bold assault on America’s most vital organs on September 11, 2001. In *War in a Time of Peace*, a best-selling book about the era between 11/9 and 9/11, William Halberstam, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, writes that perhaps he should have employed the subtitle “Why America Napped” to describe policy making during these years.⁵ Similarly, in a standard account of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, Warren Cohen, one of the nation’s most prolific and venerable diplomatic historians, states that the elder Bush and his chief advisers—National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of State James A. Baker, and Secretary of Defense Richard “Dick” Cheney—had “neither the time nor the inclination to ponder grand theory.” Clinton did little better, Cohen claims, “the sum of [his] foreign policy [was] bad but not disastrous.” And the younger Bush, George W. Bush, argues Cohen, sought to “exercise American power without restraint.” Historians, Cohen concludes, “will not be kind to him.”⁶

These views are commonplace. They are not written without admiration for the prudence, tactical dexterity, and realism of Bush 41, without respect for the restless brilliance, keen insight, and political acumen of Clinton, and without empathy for the tragic circumstances that Bush 43 was forced to handle.⁷ But for the most part, these presidents are not viewed as having had much interest in or commitment to careful strategic planning. In his diary on the day after the Berlin Wall fell, President Bush ruminated, “The big question I ask myself is how do we capitalize on these changes? . . . The bureaucracy answer [*sic*] will be, do nothing big, and wait to see what happens. But I don’t want to miss an opportunity.”⁸ But the consensus among many observers is that an opportunity was missed. Notwithstanding the deftness and insight of Bush and Scowcroft, argues Bartholomew H. Sparrow, “the administration could not lay out a new strategic course for the United States.”⁹ Likewise, in a very fair-minded, thoughtful account, the historian Hal Brands concludes, “Throughout the 1990s, U.S. officials wrestled with the challenges and opportunities of a new order. At times, they overcame the complexity that confronted them, managing crises successfully and devising policies that were well suited to a fluid international environment. More often, it seemed the complexity overcame them.”¹⁰ Rapidly moving events, concludes Mary Sarotte, “resulted in imperfect choices and costly consequences.”¹¹

In many of these sympathetic yet critical portrayals, post–Cold War officials are pictured as struggling to find a unifying strategic theme to define their foreign policy. They are compared unfavorably with many of their predecessors who are said to have heroically carried out a forty-year struggle against the forces of Soviet-led communism with a consistent framework—the policy of contain-

ment. Only after 9/11 did the younger Bush embrace a coherent strategy—the global war on terror.¹² Articulated in a series of speeches and in a famous National Security Strategy statement, disseminated in September 2002, Bush and his advisers dismissed the policies of deterrence and containment and embraced a strategy of unilateralism, preemption or prevention, and regime change.¹³ In his celebrated second inaugural address in 2005, Bush declared that it was America’s mission to end tyranny and create a democratic peace.¹⁴ Although the strategy is said to have been coherent and to have been the result of a vast array of scholarship that claimed that democratic states do not wage war against one another and, therefore, the United States would be safer in such an environment, most writers conclude that the strategy was deeply flawed for simplifying the world and overextending American power. Many of these critics claim that it was the product of a relentless neoconservative campaign to embed their views in official policy. Although these neocons (such as Paul Wolfowitz, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, and Eric Edelman) are said to have failed in their efforts in 1992 to get the ideas and policies of their Defense Policy Guidance institutionalized in subsequent policy, they are said to have triumphed in 2002.¹⁵

Reassessment: The Policymakers’ Perspectives

This book was designed to interrogate the veracity of currently prevailing views and to develop a better appreciation of the challenges that inhere in designing strategy. We asked several influential officials of the Bush 41, Clinton, and Bush 43 administrations—whose memoirs and recollections have not yet been published—to reflect on their actions, motivations, challenges, and accomplishments. What emerges in the chapters that follow is an assault on many of the established wisdoms.

Robert Zoellick, who was arguably the closest adviser to Secretary of State Baker, provides a rich and textured summary of what amounts to a very clear strategy indeed. He acknowledges that this strategy was not scripted in a single document, but he argues that it was widely shared and that it infused coherence and direction into dispersed policies that were carried out throughout the globe, from the Americas to Asia. In an arresting paragraph that defies prevailing scholarship, he writes: “The strategic concept we sought to advance in 1989 integrated foreign, security, economic, business, and trade policies.” It sought to “link security and economic interests within a political framework. It was based on U.S. interests. It valued open societies. It sought to foster economic growth and opportunity. And it promoted the development of institutions, regimes, and alliances that could evolve to meet changing circumstances. This approach was a continuation

of the post–World War II tradition of U.S. international engagement through multilateral institutions, alliances, and frameworks for partnerships.”¹⁶

Whereas Zoellick seeks to reconfigure our thinking about the overall coherence of policy, Paul Wolfowitz, the under secretary of defense for policy, illuminates the purposefulness that undergirded the evolving strategic thinking of his boss, Dick Cheney, and of his colleagues and assistants. They wanted to preserve old alliances and reassure traditional allies by promising a continuation of America’s “forward presence.” They appreciated the magnitude of change that occurred after the dissolution of the USSR and struggled to reconfigure the nation’s nuclear posture. They believed that “history was flowing in our direction,” adjusted to legislators’ demands for cuts in the defense budget, reorganized their office and administrative capacities, and sought to configure forces to shape an environment that they understood was fraught with uncertainty.¹⁷

One of Wolfowitz’s key assistants, Eric Edelman, further develops this line of thinking. He provides a very original analysis of the origins, evolution, and consequences of the famous 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG). Rather than seeing it as a singular effort by a cabal of neocons to preserve military primacy for the United States, he explains that it was an attempt to bring defense policy into line with the president’s expressed wishes and in response to the lessons learned from the war in the Persian Gulf. The document, Edelman argues, “attempted to move the discussion of U.S. strategic interests from the global challenge represented by the Soviet Union to the more likely regional threats to American security.”¹⁸ Although its leakage to the press exposed it to criticism and highlighted the difficulties of making strategic plans, Edelman insists that the basic axioms of the DPG were widely shared by Democrats as well as Republicans.

Walter B. Slocombe, the under secretary of defense for policy in the Clinton administration, illuminates the challenges that inhered in making policy toward Russia. Contrary to much that has been written about the president, Slocombe says that Clinton grasped the strategic landscape, defined his goals carefully, and tried to allocate resources in commensurate fashion. He shows, however, that a focused strategy does not ensure strategic success. Clinton failed to achieve his goals because they were overly ambitious, bedeviled by conflicting imperatives, subject to political controversy, and ultimately supported by too few resources. Moreover, Clinton’s partner in Russia—Boris Yeltsin—was unreliable. In a basically benign security environment, Slocombe concludes, governments often have greater difficulty “exploiting opportunities . . . than staving off threats.”¹⁹ Nonetheless, there was strategic thinking that shaped the contours of the Clinton administration’s policies.

Philip Zelikow was on the National Security Council (NSC) staff during the Bush 41 administration and operated in 2002 as an unofficial confidante to

Condoleezza Rice, President George W. Bush's national security adviser. In his essay in this book he turns conventional wisdom upside down. After making the claim that the strategic goals of Bush 41 were radical—that he wanted “to support change and fashion a new international system”—Zelikow says that the younger Bush actually possessed more modest aims. Inspired by fear, “W” and his aides tried to control risk in order to enhance the system's resistance to a potentially deadly threat, terrorism. Confronted with novel challenges, the younger Bush “chose methods that were experimental and unfamiliar.” The global war on terror, Zelikow writes, “was predominantly reactive and defensive.” Although the “core mission was relatively limited in relation to world politics . . . the policy instruments and actions felt surprising and even shocking.” When “these experiments succeeded,” they encouraged “new habits of thought and action.”²⁰

Contrary to established thinking once again, Zelikow claims that he, John Bellinger, and Rice, not Wolfowitz and other neocons in the Defense Department and the Office of the Vice President, were the principal authors of the National Security Strategy statement of 2002. Moreover, he emphasizes that the focus on preemption was a belated semantic adjustment and “had little to do with grand strategy.” But preemption nonetheless had important consequences for strategy, especially in an administration that was sundered by bureaucratic conflicts and personal animosities. Outcomes, however, were not predetermined, particularly because of the patchiness and uncertainty of Bush's thinking and the messiness of the policy process. Officials at State and Defense cordially detested each other: “Bureaucratic entrepreneurs struck out in every direction, latching onto favored ideas or controversies in a fractious administration staffed by plenty of veteran intriguers and their allies.” In this context, the decision to go to war against Saddam Hussein was more contingent than we usually think it was, and it certainly was not a foregone conclusion before 9/11. “Bush and his top advisers,” Zelikow concludes, “did not enter office with an ambitious agenda for changing the world.” Inspired by fear, intoxicated with a sense of resolve that 9/11 engendered, officials improvised. “It was a potent compound of anxiety mixed with . . . hubris.”²¹

The chapters written for this book by former policymakers not only introduce new information; they also present new ways to think about strategic planning in the aftermath of 11/9 and 9/11. Zoellick, Wolfowitz, Edelman, and Slocombe depict the policy that was pursued in a more favorable light. Zelikow, although critical of the policy process, is nonetheless sympathetic to the extraordinary pressures under which officials labored. “War,” he emphasizes, “was not a metaphor or a conflict being handled by distant generals and armies. It was real; the threats could come directly into their homes; the judgment calls that might save lives were theirs to make.” The absence of solid information about potential threats

was terrifying. “People do not understand how goddamn dangerous we thought it was,” confided one senior CIA analyst.²² Overall, then, these contributions by policymakers encourage us to see more coherence and more intelligence behind the policies that unfolded than is usually thought to be the case in the existing literature. Strategy is hard to make even in ordinary times, let alone in the unexpected landscapes that emerged after 11/9 and 9/11. We see officials fighting with one another, reacting to leaks, seeking to balance discordant priorities, struggling to mobilize resources to support goals, and worrying about engendering legislative and popular support for their initiatives.

Reassessment: The Views of Scholars

In turbulent times, the right and the wrong things to do are far from clear for analysts as well. A superb group of scholars offers views both supportive and critical in their assessment of U.S. policy making under uncertainty. In the opening chapter of this book, Mary Sarotte, a prize-winning historian, calls 1989 a “punctuational” moment—a moment of dramatic and unexpected change. The events surrounding the fall of the Wall, she writes, “were fraught with uncertainty and risk.” They arose independent of American will. Critical decisions “about the future of U.S. foreign policy” emerged “not as a result of thoughtful deliberation but in haste and in response to external pressures; once sanctioned, they [became] very hard to change.”²³ In such an atmosphere, chance and contingency dominated. Sorting through feasible options and predicting what would be efficacious depended on a host of variables, many of which were beyond the control of policymakers.

But lest we be tempted to be too sympathetic to the worldviews and prescriptions of the policymakers, we are forcefully reminded of their shortcomings in the incisive chapter by Sarotte as well as in those by John Mueller, Bruce Cumings, and Odd Arne Westad. Sarotte does praise President Bush and Secretary of State Baker for their imaginative improvisation, for their support of German chancellor Helmut Kohl’s initiatives, and for their capacity to bring about Germany’s unification inside NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). U.S. officials were right, she notes, to worry about the potential for violence and to be wary about experimenting with new security institutions. But her overriding conclusion is that Bush and Baker missed a unique opportunity to configure new institutions for the post–Cold War era, institutions that might have fostered the integration of Russia into a new international order. “Unlike 1945,” Sarotte stresses, “American leaders in 1990 sought to maintain established structures rather than create new ones.”²⁴

Like Sarotte, John Mueller, a prolific and iconoclastic political scientist, draws a series of deft comparisons between U.S. policy making during the Cold War and after the Cold War. American officials, he acknowledges, compiled a good record integrating former enemies into a vibrant democratic capitalist community. He refers to Germany and Japan after World War II and to Eastern Europe—but not Russia—after the Cold War. Policymakers did less well, however, extrapolating lessons from the past, grasping the essentials of the evolving international landscape, and gauging the degree of threat. They tended to exaggerate American vulnerabilities and, therefore, designed policies that wasted resources and lives in a struggle to overcome insecurities that did not exist. Mueller raises fundamental questions about how to interpret threats and asks why officials exaggerate dangers.

For Bruce Cumings, the answers are rather clear. A renowned and provocative historian of modern Korea and a penetrating analyst of the international political economy and U.S. foreign economic policy, Cumings believes that people's basic assumptions do not change easily; these assumptions often trump new knowledge and are resistant to new information "particularly when something entirely unanticipated happens." Cumings examines, among other things, why U.S. officials persisted in exaggerating the danger of the North Korean threat while stressing the vulnerability of the regime, views that changed little over the decades. Why, for example, did John Deutsch, Clinton's director of Central Intelligence, and Paul Wolfowitz, Bush's deputy secretary of defense, continue to predict the "coming collapse" of Korea even as they dwelled on the portentous nature of the regime's nuclear ambitions? Their errors, argues Cumings, are fundamental because they derive from officials' core assumptions. These policymakers (and their favorite pundits) continue to see North Korea "entirely through the lenses of Soviet and East European communism and therefore cannot grasp the regime's very different history, the pragmatic shrewdness of its post-Soviet foreign policy, the desperate and cruel survival strategies it is willing to undertake, let alone the anticolonial and revolutionary nationalist origins of this regime."²⁵ These officials, concludes Cumings, cannot avoid speaking in metaphors, metaphors that are grounded in unconscious illusions and that are shaped by emotions that have little to do with reality.

Odd Arne Westad, one of the most eminent historians of the Cold War, offers a probing critique of U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. He emphasizes that in times of uncertainty, officials draw on the lessons of the past, on their core values, and on their most basic ideological predilections. Examining U.S. actions in the aftermath of 9/11, he argues that American policymakers drew the wrong conclusions from their victory in the Cold War, misconstrued the role of technology, underestimated the dislocation and anguish caused by the globalization of world

financial and commercial markets, exaggerated the universal appeal of their own values, and tried to impose societal change from without. “Unlike Eastern Europe in 1989,” he writes, “the two states [Afghanistan and Iraq] in which the United States intervened in the 2000s had no history of democracy, no tradition of functioning capitalist economies, and no national leaders who could overcome ethnic and religious divisions. . . . The idea of a domino-like spread of democratic change in the Middle East after the invasion of Iraq was therefore a chimera.”²⁶

The dilemmas of decision making in uncertain times are beautifully illuminated in the chapter by William Wohlforth, a leading scholar of international relations. He shows that his colleagues in the academy often prescribed solutions to such matters as German unification and NATO expansion that, at least in retrospect, were likely to have been less wise than those adopted by the policy-makers. Those of us who are historians of American foreign policy and scholars of international relations should be chastened by our own record. “The style of reasoning” that adds gravitas to the “analytical power [of independent experts] in normal times,” Wohlforth suggests, “may hamper their ability to update quickly when the underpinnings of a long established strategic equilibrium come unhinged.”²⁷

Reexamining Strategy in Uncertain Times

The critiques of official U.S. strategic thinking and action in the Sarotte, Mueller, Cumings, and Westad chapters raise profound questions about whether U.S. strategy actually changed in consonance with the rapidly evolving international landscape. Fears did not abate, values did not change, ideas did not mutate, and U.S. goals and interests did not change all that much. What seems clear from the chapters—and from the discussions at the conference at which drafts of these chapters were discussed—is that in the immediate aftermath of 11/9, George H. W. Bush and his advisers still remained wary of the Soviet Union and uncertain of Gorbachev’s intentions. They reacted cautiously yet improvised brilliantly to bring about German unification inside NATO. Rather than disbanding the alliances of the Cold War and the multilateral institutions and networks of global capitalism, they sought to build upon them.

Only in 1991–92, in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War and the dissolution of the USSR, did officials really come to grips with the astounding changes in the international landscape that had been wrought by Gorbachev’s reforms and failures. “In a blink of an eye,” Scowcroft recollected, the assumptions, institutions, and defense strategies became outdated. “We were suddenly in a unique position, without experience, without precedent, and standing alone at the height of power. It was, it is, an unparalleled situation in history, one which presents us

with the rarest opportunity to shape the world and the deepest responsibility to do so wisely for the benefit of not just the United States but all nations.”²⁸

The challenge, then, was how to make strategy in this vastly changed world. Zoellick was trying to do so in the State Department and Wolfowitz, Edelman, and their colleagues were forging ahead in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. They seem to have discussed their ideas with one another rather little, but this does not necessarily mean that they defined the nation’s aims, goals, and interests in conflicting ways. But whether they adjusted effectively to the vastly altered environment and whether they took advantage of the “unparalleled situation in history” to forge the new world order that President Bush liked to talk about, but never carefully defined, is open to question.

As Scowcroft said, they had the “rarest opportunity” to make strategy and shape the world in what they and their successors in the Clinton administration regarded as a benign environment. But benign environments present peculiar problems of their own, especially in a democratic pluralist polity where domestic constituencies looked inward and parochial interests predominated. Moreover, basking in the triumphalism of the immediate post–Cold War era, Republican and Democratic officials alike were less prone than ever to reevaluate prevailing ideas about political economy and strategy; indeed in many respects Zoellick’s plans and those of his colleagues in the Defense Department were extrapolations and extensions of long-term U.S. aspirations to invigorate global capitalism, open commercial and financial markets, thwart rivals from dominating regions of perceived vital interest, and extend prevailing alliances and institutions. In a benign environment where threats seemed muted, new ideas did not percolate and policymakers were not inclined to be as bold and experimental as circumstances might have allowed.

In fact, if strategy involves accurate threat perception as well as shrewd assessment of interest, perhaps in the 1990s looming threats were not sufficiently appreciated. Bush 41 and Clinton administration officials sought to squeeze all they could from their old Cold War enemy—for example, pressing rapid NATO enlargement—and discounted worries about mounting Russian resentment. Focused on great power rivals and fearful of rogue threats in Asia and the Middle East, policymakers tended to ignore or downplay warnings of terrorist activity from radical Islamic fundamentalist groups with transnational ambitions. Suddenly, then, when a different set of walls came down on 9/11, the strategic environment appeared drastically altered. Rather than benign, it was portentous. As Zelikow notes, anxiety and hubris, in equal degrees, shaped policymakers’ reactions. They scrambled to design an effective strategy to deal with a vastly transformed international landscape, but their performance was not commensurate with their aspirations.

In the conclusion, we will return to these matters. But for now, we seek to invite our readers to revisit the post-11/9 and post-9/11 eras with our group of policymakers and scholars. In their different ways, they force us to rethink and reassess familiar historical territory. They invite us both to look more sympathetically on the making of strategy after these transformative moments, and to ask more critical, probing, and perhaps even embarrassing questions about the nature of grand strategic formulations in eras of uncertainty. How does the nature of the environment, threatening or promising, affect the ability of officials to adapt? Can they measure threats and opportunities accurately? Are policymakers more effective in reacting to immediate dangers and opportunities than in formulating long-term analyses and plans? Are they capable of changing their strategic ideas and values to match evolving international circumstances? How does public opinion and domestic politics shape their responses? Can officials mobilize resources in ways proportionate to the aims they seek without vastly exaggerating dangers or hopes? Can complex bureaucracies and democratic polities actually forge grand strategies?

As we reexamine the history of the post–Cold War era, we have a unique opportunity also to rethink some of the most fundamental challenges that inhere in the making of strategy. In this book, we invite readers to reexamine these events from the perspectives of policymakers who actually had to grapple with making strategy in uncertain times and from those of scholars who can take a more retrospective view. The years that have followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall have been far more turbulent and perilous than anticipated. We have been witnessing a lone superpower trying to adapt to a world that had not been foreseen. In this book, chastened by events, we see policymakers and scholars alike seeking to learn from the recent past in order to advance both historical understanding and strategic thinking.