



**THE MUCH TOO PROMISED LAND:
AMERICA'S ELUSIVE SEARCH FOR ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE**

by Aaron David Miller

My book [The Much Too Promised Land](#) had a very strange origin in the sense that I really never intended to write it. I “resigned” from the State Department in January 2003. Only two secretaries of state in the history of the republic have ever “resigned” over matters of principle: William Jennings Bryan because he opposed Woodrow Wilson’s policies in the run-up to World War I and Cyrus Vance because he was fundamentally against President Carter’s abortive hostage rescue mission in April 1980. One doesn’t resign from the Department of State easily. I left because I had concluded rightly—and nothing has changed my mind in the past five years—that the road to Arab-Israeli peace was going to be a long and bumpy one. It had come time for me to take a break after 25 years of providing varying degrees of advice, some good, some bad, to a number of secretaries of state. I have a new trope which is that there ought to be term limits imposed on former advisors to presidents and secretaries, particularly those whose advice perhaps doesn’t lead to success.

I went on to run Seeds of Peace, which brings young Arabs and Israelis, Indians and Pakistanis together, to try to forge understanding and respect. As I watched over the past five years, I was disturbed by the fact that America, a country I care a great deal about, was failing. It was failing at a time and in a part of the world that made that failure extremely risky for our interests.

The primary threat to our national security will not come from an ascending China, however competitive and powerful it may be, or from an economically powerful and united Europe. It’s not even going to come from a former USSR seeking to regain its past glory. It’s going to come from an area of the world that is divided, dysfunctional, and angry, filled with rage and conflicts that cannot be resolved.

September 11 was the second bloodiest day in U.S. history, surpassed only by September 17, 1862 at Antietam. So what happens in the part of the world from which the 9/11 attacks emanated is critical to our national interests. Our interests there cannot be measured in terms of administrations. While serving in government, I divided my life in terms of administrations. That’s not the right way to calibrate time. That’s not the way our friends calibrate it, nor our adversaries. They calibrate time in terms of generations. We need to start thinking that way, too.

Both of the Democratic presidential candidates are willfully deluding either themselves or us if they believe that the road out of Iraq will be quick, easy, and fixed according to a neat time period. America has to assume responsibility for what it does. We invaded a country roughly the size of the state of California, with 28 million people. We ripped the lid off it and dismantled the army and other Baath institutions of governance. What makes us believe that somehow we can simply turn around and exit? Some would argue that that’s the morally and ethically right thing to do. But the question is, when the Republican or Democratic successor to the current administration confronts the reality of this investment trap into which this administration has put us, from which we cannot extricate ourselves or fix the situation, what is he or she going to do? Can we really leave Afghanistan and Iraq as failed states?

If Iraq over time ends up being a stable democratic polity, that would be great. But that’s not really the question, is it? The question is, what has Iraq cost us? My friend Thomas Friedman says, you don’t win the lottery if you don’t buy a ticket. Fair enough. But there are some tickets in life that just aren’t worth buying—they are too risky.

All of this prompted me to think about the reasons for both America’s success and primarily its failures in this region. For eight years under Bill Clinton, we stumbled at Arab-Israeli peacemaking; for eight years under President Bush we stumbled at how to make war, at least in this part of the world. What is it about America, the greatest power on earth, that accounts for this situation? Why can’t we seem to get it right?

When I say “get it right,” I don’t mean “fix this region.” Most of the problems there are not caused by America. And this region is not going to be “fixed” by us. The history of this region is the history of great powers who over 1,000 years, over the

sweep and arc of history, have tried to impose their will on small tribes. Good luck! This region is littered with the schemes, dreams, ambitions of great powers who believed they could have their way and impose their will. We can't for one simple reason: we don't live in the neighborhood. However powerful we think we are, these small tribes, these tiny powers, will always have a greater stake in the outcome of their struggles than we ever will. Because for us it is not an existential conflict.

In light of all this, I came to two realizations. First, we don't pay attention to the past. A.J.P. Taylor, the great British historian, said that the only lesson of history is that there are no lessons. But do you want to ignore history? If you ignore it completely, history will be a very cruel and unforgiving teacher.

America occupied Japan for seven years, from 1945-52. How many Americans were killed by Japanese in hostile actions during that seven-year period? None. Japan was a defeated nation. Despite all his imperfections, General MacArthur understood the importance of preserving Japanese institutions that were very controversial, including the emperor himself. What were we thinking when we went to war in Iraq with insufficient forces to even have a chance of subduing an insurgency? And what did we expect would happen in the wake of our own incapacity and the determination of the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds to settle scores?

So that was the first problem. As William Faulkner observed in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." That is certainly how Arabs and Israelis see it; we need to see it that way, as well.

Second, we don't read the present correctly. We don't see the world the way it is. We want to see the world the way we want it to be. Why? It's related to where we are. We have attained a degree of physical security and detachment unprecedented, unparalleled, unrivaled in history for a great power. We have non-predatory neighbors to our north and south, and fish to our east and west. No other great power has ever had this kind of physical security. In my opinion, it explains why we behave the way we do. It explains our boundless optimism. Our political system was the first in the world to be founded on the basis of an idea--the primacy of the individual. We believe in individuals' capacity to transform themselves and to change the world around them, with all the imperfections, deficits, and problems that America has.

I lived with this practical, we can fix anything, split-the-difference worldview for 20 years. The eighth day of the Camp David summit of July 2000, Jerusalem, this extraordinarily complicated city, was to become the focus. A piece of it: what to do about the Haram al Sharif, 35 acres, on which sit two mosques holy to Islam. Below are the remains of the first and second Jewish temples. Talk about overlapping sacred space, that's what this is. Here we are trying to convince the Israelis and Palestinians, who both assert sovereignty, that we'll take sovereignty from them and we'll reposit it with God. That's a logical fix--they're holy sites, after all. Or, when they rejected that idea, "We'll give you Palestinians sovereignty above ground, and you Israelis sovereignty below." They rejected that as well. Jerusalem, history teaches us, is not to be shared, it's to be possessed. In the name of God, and the tribe. It need not be so, but Americans need to understand the attachments of each side to it.

Where we are also explains our naivete and our capacity to believe that the rest of the world is like us. Twelve years ago, my daughter and I were at a movie theater outside of Washington, D.C. watching Sean Connery in *The Rock*. I noticed several muscular men in the theater talking into their lapels, a sure sign they were security and someone of real importance was there. Sure enough, eight rows in front of us were King Hussein and Queen Noor. He had on blue jeans, a blazer, and a polo shirt. We knew each other, so we chatted. I said later to my daughter, "Isn't this great? It's me and you and the King of Jordan in Washington watching Sean Connery in *The Rock*." As if we were all part of the same family. We were not. When he was 12, this man saw his grandfather Abdullah murdered. He presided for forty-five years over one of the most fragile enterprises in the Middle East, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and made it work. Or Benjamin Netanyahu, whom Madeleine Albright declared to be the Israeli Newt Gingrich. Netanyahu's high school education in Philadelphia and his American mother gave him a superb capacity in the American vernacular. I remember on one trip being summoned, along with my colleagues, to be yelled at by him. When I closed my eyes, I heard my college tennis coach yelling at me. I didn't hear Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, graduate of one of Israel's elite paratrooper brigades, brother of Jonathan, who had been killed in the rescue mission at Entebbe; son of a prominent revisionist historian. I have nothing in common with Benjamin Netanyahu. We don't understand what it's like to live on a knife's edge.

So I decided to try to apply these principles to the 20-plus years I participated in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. I did not write this book only for the Beltway crowd and policy wonks. I tried to make it accessible, building on anecdotes and stories from my experience. Then I set about interviewing everyone I could find who had participated in the earlier diplomacy. I interviewed all of our former presidents, even Gerald Ford before he died, with one exception: Bill Clinton. All nine secretaries of state from Henry Kissinger to Condoleezza Rice, national security advisors; there's a chapter on domestic politics that seeks to answer the much misunderstood and hijacked question, how does domestic politics in America really influence our Arab-Israeli policy? For that I went out and interviewed all the evangelicals--the late Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, John Hagee--a lot of sitting senators, representatives, American Jews and Arabs. I tell the story of why America succeeds and why it fails in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, bearing in mind one basic fact. I borrow a line from Michael Jackson, not known as a great philosopher. But he got it right when he said that if you want to make a change, start with the man in the mirror.

I could cite a thousand reasons why Yassir Arafat was the primary obstacle, followed closely by Ehud Barak, in the failure of Camp David. But ultimately Bill Clinton and the rest of his advisors bear a measure of responsibility. We need not self-flagellate in some maudlin, gratuitous way, but we do need to identify our role in the summit's failure and learn from it.

A few observations. First, as to objectivity, I argued with my editor for a week about how much personal information to include. He said, if you want people to believe you, you had better come clean. "Tell them who you are and where you came from, how your views changed." I concluded that there is no objectivity. We are all sum totals of our experiences—our political, religious, and ethnic DNA. You can't change who you are, but you can look to see where your predispositions, prejudices, and biases lie and set them aside in an effort to try to understand the needs, narratives, and requirements of both sides to a conflict. I'm from a wealthy Jewish real estate family in Cleveland, Ohio. My grandparents were on a first-name basis with David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. My parents were very close to Yitzhak and Leah Rabin as well as Menachim Begin. My story is an interesting one in terms of an evolution in views. It's absolutely critical that some evolution occur, some learning about both sides' needs, because this is not a morality play that pits the forces of goodness on one hand against the forces of darkness on the other.

Second, there can be no bricks without straw. No matter how much America wants Arab-Israeli peace, unless the raw material is there, the political will and the urgency among the Arabs and Israelis, we can try all day long without success. Every breakthrough that has occurred in this conflict—Egypt-Israel, Jordan-Israel, Palestinians-Israel, came as a consequence of secret diplomacy about which the Americans were informed afterwards. That is very instructive.

Third, you need a brickmaker. Every successful negotiation that has endured involved an American role at some point. In my book, I nominate for the "Peace Process Hall of Fame" three Americans, all of whom I interviewed: Jimmy Carter, who during his presidency delivered something extraordinary—an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty—that would not have happened without him; Henry Kissinger, and James Baker. They were all effective brickmakers, effective because they combined the 4 Ts of successful diplomacy: they were Tough; they gained the Trust, to a degree, of the Arabs and Israelis they were working with; they were incredibly Tenacious; and they had an exquisite sense of Timing. They knew how not to overengage (as Bill Clinton did) or underengage or disengage (George W. Bush). Not since 1991 have we seen, in my judgment, an effective policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Fourth, there is tremendous misunderstanding on the issue of domestic politics, where there is a dishonest debate. Too many American Jews want to believe that domestic politics are irrelevant to the case for Israel; too many of Israel's detractors in America want to believe that it's all attributable to domestic politics. Unlike professors Walt and Mearsheimer, I actually went out to talk to the lobby and the lobbied. Among the conclusions I reached is that the pro-Israeli community in America today (5.3 million American Jews, along with millions of evangelical Christians who for reasons of eschatology and value affinity have become stunningly pro-Israel) has a powerful voice. It's time we stop deluding ourselves. But it does not have a veto.

The U.S.-Israeli relationship is not some sort of mushroom harvested in some dark closet by a handful of conspiratorially minded Jews and evangelical Christians who hold the American foreign policy establishment hostage. The U.S.-Israeli relationship has inculcated itself into American culture, psychology, politics and foreign policy. When we maintain the special relationship, which I think is in American interests, and not allow it to become exclusive, it actually can serve our interests. This is both because it is in our interests to support like-minded societies and because our special ties with Israel give us a primary role and ability to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Since 1950, only 22 countries in the world have maintained their democratic character continuously. The notion of an emerging democracy—Kenya, for example—is a concept that may be legitimate, but the ultimate arbiter of everything is time. Israel is a democracy. We can argue about the West Bank and Gaza, I'm a vocal critic of Israel's policies there. But this is important, because supporting societies that share our values represents the broadest conception of what constitutes our national interests.

Fifth, regarding the Clinton years. Clinton was one of the most empathetic, talented, brilliant presidents and negotiators you'd ever want to meet. No one cared more or tried to do more on this problem. But empathy alone is not enough. Achieving the conflict-ending agreements he sought required a toughness he and we didn't have during his tenure.

Sixth, regarding George W. Bush. Governing is about choosing. You come to Washington, you decide what's important to you, you pursue it. Arab-Israeli peace wasn't important to Bush throughout the first administration; he had another agenda. It may still not be that important to him. There's a chance that between now and the end of the year something positive could happen between Omert and Abbas, but this is really no longer primarily an American story. My friend Larry Summers, the former president of Harvard University, said that in the history of the world, nobody ever washed a rental car. You only care about what you own. If a U.S. president doesn't invest in this or whatever other issue he or she chooses, opponents both at home and abroad will quickly figure this out. That will make success impossible.

Finally, to end on an optimistic note, John F. Kennedy said something very important. He described himself as an idealist without illusion. That's what America needs to be. I don't care if it's health care or the Arab-Israeli conflict. We can't tell our young people never, we can't mortgage the future and give in to cynicism and despair. But as you seek to change the world, you have to do so with your eyes open. Because the stakes now are much higher than they've ever been before.

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at the Department of State as an adviser to six Secretaries of State. This essay is based on the BookTalk he gave at FPRI on April 28, 2008, at which copies of his book were sold by Joseph Fox Bookshop, 1724 Sansom St., Philadelphia (www.foxbookshop.com), where the book is also available.

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