Review: The Education of an Idealist by Samantha Power

Reviewed by Jo Brick


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The Education of an Idealist

Samantha Power

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HarperCollins Publishers (October 2019)
Reviewed by Jo Brick

Samantha Power is a person who truly lives in the world. She is a woman who has fought in the arena and led a life that epitomises Roosevelt’s appeal to citizenship. She has taken determined action, both in her personal actions and her attempts to influence the use of national and institutional power; and she has strived, throughout her career as a journalist, human rights advocate, author, academic, adviser to President Obama and as US Ambassador to the UN, to make a difference.

In her 2019 memoir, The Education of an Idealist, Power relates with engaging candour and wit what has informed and influenced her idealism and her determination to uphold human dignity and alleviate suffering. From her early childhood in Dublin and migration to the US through formative years at Yale and early career as a freelance correspondent in war-torn Bosnia to walking the halls of the White House and taking part in some of most critical foreign policy challenges of the Obama Presidency she tells an inspiring life story. But perhaps more importantly, it is a story about the importance of mastering cognitive dissonance as an essential skill in strategic policymaking and in the preparation for the accompanying internal personal struggle between

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again...

Theodore Roosevelt, 23 April 1910

‘I believe that dignity is an underestimated force in politics and geopolitics.’

Samantha Power


ideals and the revelation that bargains are required to realise them.

**Idealism, dignity and action**

It just feels like I should be doing something more useful than thinking about sports all the time.³

Perhaps Power’s most formative experience was on 4 June 1989. The then 18-year-old had notions of becoming a sports journalist and that summer was interning at the local Atlanta CSB sports affiliate⁴. In her memoir, Power describes watching the raw footage coming in of the Tiananmen Square protests that day. The now iconic images of ‘Tank Man’—the man carrying plastic shopping bags, standing in the middle of the road in front of the first tank in the armoured column—have remained with her as the epitome of quiet, powerful resistance. As she explains, ‘The stark image arrested my attention. That, I thought, was an assertion of dignity’.⁵ For Samantha Power, Tank Man was the catalyst for her development of a global consciousness and a life dedicated to the protection of human dignity around the world. ‘For the first time, I reacted as though current events had something to do with me. I felt, in a way that I couldn’t have explained in the moment, that I had a stake in what happened to the lone man with his shopping bags’.⁶

Power complemented her tertiary studies while studying for her BA at Yale with travel to Europe in 1990. She visited the Anne Frank house and Dachau concentration camp, where accounts of the lived experiences of the Second World War instilled in her the gravity of the Holocaust. She then witnessed the first free election in Czechoslovakia, which again highlighted to her the importance of dignity as a historical force.

Power’s engagement with the world was consolidated by her time as a junior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington think tank, soon after graduating in 1992. There she was mentored by the likes of Morton Abramowitz (former US Ambassador to Turkey) and Fred Cuny (humanitarian relief worker). Under Abramowitz’s influence Power’s interest in the Bosnian conflict intensified, culminating in her primer about the conflict for Carnegie, *Breakdown in the Balkans*.⁷ This gave her a renewed sense of purpose and a drive to ‘make a difference’, as she recalls in a frustrated journal en-

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3 Power, Idealist, 43.
4 ‘Ambassador Samantha Power’s 2016 Class Day address’, YaleNews, 22 May 2016, https://news.yale.edu/2016/05/22/ambassador-samantha-powers-2016-class-day-address
5 Power, Idealist, 41.
6 Power, Idealist, 42.
try from the time, which simply said: ‘...Act, Power.’

**People matter**

Power went on to spend the next two years as a freelance war correspondent filing stories from Sarajevo on the suffering of the people in the Bosnia conflict. She hoped that such stories would pressure the United States into taking action. This experience galvanised Power’s interest in the law, which she went on to study at Harvard, as a means to a possible new career prosecuting alleged war crimes at The Hague. Instead, however, she became the executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and focused on the question of genocide—what did US policymakers themselves think when responding to genocide? When is military force justified; how does one measure the risks of action and inaction before deciding what to do (on the basis of incomplete information); what would it mean if countries could act unilaterally to use force without any rules? The answer manifested in Power’s 2003 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *A Problem from Hell—America and the Age of Genocide*.

This was to bring Power to the attention of then Senator Barack Obama, who would later appoint her Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights on the National Security Council in his Presidential Administration from 2009 to 2013. It was an opportunity to directly influence the development and implementation of American policy and her insider’s account of the Obama administration relates many examples of the challenges that exist in reconciling the ideals of protecting human dignity with the practical aspects of statecraft.

An apt vignette of this challenge is revealed in Power’s attempts to highlight the genocidal nature of the killing of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Power included the word ‘genocide’ in Obama’s speech to an annual commemoration of the event by Armenian Americans, but it was removed by other staffers as the use of the word had been avoided since 1981 so as not to offend Turkey, a NATO ally. She ultimately conceded: ‘I would never be able to put myself in his shoes or appreciate the variables he was weighing’.

**Cognitive dissonance**

On 21 August 2013, the Syrian regime used sarin gas weapons against its own civilian population, killing more than 1,400 people in one of the most horrific war crimes of the conflict. Power’s involvement in Obama’s deliberations on how to respond saw

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9 Power, *Idealist*, 120.
her directly face circumstances that pitted the protection and enforcement of human dignity against hard power. She had only recently been appointed US Ambassador to the UN and her role was to galvanise international diplomatic efforts. Obama had established his ‘red line’ one year previously, when the Syrian government first used such chemical weapons. The question was would Obama act. Air strikes against the Assad regime in response to the attack risked drawing the US into an expanding conflict in Syria and would call into question US credibility in addressing other attacks by Assad against the Syrian population. Obama considered unilateral military action but then switched course, choosing to obtain Congressional support for any use of force. Power recounts the myriad other non-military efforts—diplomatic efforts with Russia and Iran, economic sanctions and asset freezes against Syrian government officials—that were attempted. However, Russia used its veto power to prevent sanctions. Power arrived at the realisation that even if all her efforts at the UN worked, it would only remove one weapon from Assad’s arsenal and the greater issue of the Syrian conflict would continue. This experience demonstrated to Power the importance of cognitive dissonance in her work. Being able ‘to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time’ is an essential foundation for exercising judgement at the strategic level.

There were many other instances at the UN, however, where Power was able to protect human dignity; including galvanising UN support for a resolution that brought together international resources to counter the Ebola epidemic in 2014. However, in ‘Toussaint’, perhaps the most poignant chapter of the book, Power relates a tragic incident that occurred in 2016, which also provides one of the best metaphors for problem-solving on the global stage. When travelling to Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria to understand the ground-level fight against Boko Haram, Toussaint Birwea, a local six-year-old boy was struck and killed by a car in her motorcade as they passed through a Cameroonian village. His death haunted Power and emphasised the fact that sometimes trying to do the right thing ends up making matters worse. Yet she resolves that inaction is not the answer: ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions, to be sure. But turning a blind eye to the toughest problems in the world is a guaranteed shortcut to the same destination’.  

**Conclusion**

‘And I certainly had not entered government expecting that it would be easy to fulfil every campaign pledge or win every battle to inject concern for human con-

11 Power, Idealist, 487.
sequences into high-level decision-making... I was profoundly privileged to be in a position where I could at least try to make a difference.\textsuperscript{12}

Some of us have the privilege of watching the world from the sidelines, with wars, genocide and their attendant suffering outside our boundaries. These events happen at the periphery of our daily existence and we can commentate on these world events from the luxury of our armchairs. People like Power, however, have reported on these events from firsthand observation or have negotiated and written papers on which national and international action is founded.

\textit{The Education of an Idealist} does not provide a handy manual for how to work as a global or national policy-maker, as Power provides only one perspective to many complicated and controversial events of the last 20 years. This is the primary limitation of Power’s book, but it does not make it any different from any other autobiographical accounts by other statesmen. Arguably, such books are not read as ‘how-to’ guides but as a means to seek insights and counsel from others who have preceded us in their efforts to make change. It would be easy to criticise someone like Power as one who has sold out her idealism amidst the dust, sweat and blood of international relations. However, this is a criticism often levelled through naiveté and a lack of appreciation of the requirement to take a proportionate, rather than binary, approach to wicked global problems where all actions have unintended consequences. Many of us in national security, probably started our careers because we wanted to make a difference. As we have progressed, we are likely to have been stymied or defeated by realism from daring to act valiantly.

The strength of Power’s work is that her book can provide our shrinking idealism with a renewed inspiration. Samantha Power is a role model to me and I had the privilege of meeting her when she was in Australia promoting this book. She is a passionate speaker and brought her story to life in a manner that was inspirational and infectious. She is the exemplar for a passionate and driven statesperson who cares for human dignity and who provides us with the impetus and inspiration to act as positive stewards of our world.

Oppression, tyranny and war create circumstances in which there seems no hope for individual dignity. The true value of this book is that it encapsulates one person’s determination to protect dignity in places and situations where it does not start with a fighting chance. How can the idealistic words in international treaties and conventions prevail against the pragmatism

\textsuperscript{12} Power, \textit{Idealist}, 249.
of force? Because driven individuals continue to grapple with these seemingly insoluble and intractable global issues. The advice given to Power by Jonathan Moore, a former US State Department official, articulately captures the moral of Power’s story: ‘You can use your position to help a lot of people out there. The world is filled with broken places. Pick your battles, and go win some’. 13

13 Power, Idealist, 516.