

“Incisive and provocative. . . . Sestanovich has made a masterful contribution to the history of modern American diplomacy.” —Madeleine Albright



# Maximalist

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AMERICA IN THE WORLD  
FROM TRUMAN TO OBAMA

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Stephen Sestanovich

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

# HOW PAST INFORMS PRESENT

STEPHEN SESTANOVICH DISCUSSES HIS BOOK *MAXIMALIST: AMERICA IN THE WORLD FROM TRUMAN TO OBAMA*, AND HIS THOUGHTS ON U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The current state of international affairs is disheartening and unpredictable. But, argues Stephen Sestanovich in his book *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (Knopf, 2014), no matter how rosy the history of U.S. foreign policy may seem, our past was “just as confused and chaotic as the present.” Sestanovich, who worked in U.S. diplomacy for many years, most notably as ambassador-at-large for the former Soviet Union and special adviser to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright from 1997 to 2001, describes U.S. foreign policy as a constant back-and-forth between what he calls “maximalist” presidents seeking to increase the U.S. presence on the international stage and “retrenchment” presidents seeking to scale it back. Neither approach is inherently good or bad, he argues. Each has had real successes, and yet “both are prone to error and require the correction of a new policy.” In fact, the ability to change course is precisely what has made U.S. foreign policy so successful. I met with Sestanovich in early September 2014, in his office at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs, to discuss his book and his thoughts on U.S. foreign policy.

**Masha Udensiva-Brenner:** Your book commences in the post–World War II period, when a weak, impoverished Europe could easily have been swallowed up by the USSR. Why did the United States step in? How did we come to see ourselves as international problem solvers?

**Stephen Sestanovich:** The preference of American policy makers has not always been to solve every problem. In the aftermath of World War II, Washington’s expectation was that other countries would again contribute to a successful international order. But American presidents and policy makers discovered then, as they have repeatedly discovered since, that you can’t count on others too much. Now, it’s part of our DNA to be skeptical of what others can contribute.

A second lesson American leaders have drawn is that international organizations and institutions also don’t contribute very much. At the end of World War II, it was hoped that the United Nations would be a forum for problem solving. That turned out to be a disappointment. Even some of the institutions we think of as more successful, like the IMF [International Monetary Fund] or the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], were not central to the creation of the post–World War II order. It was created through American policy and initiative. Skepticism about what our allies and partners can do, skepticism about what international institutions can do, has been part of American foreign policy thinking for a long time. The activism that the Truman administration came to was the strategy they settled on once they saw that others weren’t going to step up.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Initially, containment was a nonaggressive policy—the idea was to avoid another war by building up strength and institutions on the Western side, not to weaken the USSR’s hold on Eastern Europe. How and when did that strategy veer from



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its course? Why did some of the architects of containment, such as George Kennan, eventually turn against the idea?

**Sestanovich:** A fascinating story. Acheson and Kennan disagreed about some of the most fundamental aspects of American policy. Kennan thought that accepting German and Japanese neutrality would be sound moves for the United States. Acheson thought it was a terrible idea. Kennan was very unhappy with the formation of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]; he thought it overinvolved America in European affairs. The version of containment Kennan imagined was much more consistent with the traditional European balance of power; containment as Acheson imagined it was a policy very strongly led by the United States, with a rather rigid diplomatic posture toward the Soviet Union and demanding American management of the Western alliance.

A further enlargement of American aims took place in the 1970s and '80s, and both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan contributed to it. Reagan favored a full-blown challenge to the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. Carter was much more hesitant, but for all his hesitations he too enlarged American foreign policy aims. After the Vietnam War was over and the United States began to adjust to a new role, the key initiative of Nixon's policy—that is, *détente*—faced real criticism. And Carter was one of its more powerful critics. He said, in effect, this downsizes American policy too much. Although Reagan carried a new strategy forward in a more energetic and single-minded way, it was Carter, with his human rights policy, who began the revival of American ideological aims.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** So it was Carter who shook up *détente*?

**Sestanovich:** Carter is an interesting case of someone who was elected in part because of his criticism of Nixon and Kissinger's retrenchment. But he did not have a clear idea of what policy he wanted to put in its place. He struggled with that throughout his term in office. He seemed to want a new activism and energy on the part of the United States. But even late in his term—after the invasion of Afghanistan, for example—he hesitated to make a fundamental break with the core policy he had criticized, which was *détente*.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** You summed up Carter's biggest downfall as his ambivalence in response to foreign policy. What are some parallels you see between him and Obama?

**Sestanovich:** People don't always appreciate it when you compare them to Jimmy Carter, but I don't mean the comparison as a criticism of Obama, only as a way of understanding his situation a little bit better. He seems committed to the same kind of idealism in international affairs that Carter also represented. He too has hesitated to commit American power to the pursuit of that idealism. His ambivalence is like Carter's. In both of them you see a real caution, often very carefully thought out, about policies that might bog down the United States—as Obama sees it, in the futile enterprises for which he criticized President Bush. It is not easy to oversee retrenchment and to find a way to reenergize American policy at the same time. That has been hard for Obama, just as it was hard for Carter, and for most of our retrenchment presidents.

Retrenchment presidents try to find a way to blunt the downward impact of what they're doing. To keep from going down the drain, as president Nixon often put it. But I'm struck by how you're usually one thing or the other. You can be a maximalist president with large aims and keep reminding yourself to avoid over-commitment. But you are still prone to the same mistakes.

One of the things I learned from studying Reagan is how he did manage to avoid overcommitment. Remember, he was the maximalist who avoided losing public support

by getting bogged down in a stalemated war. He was able to do so in part because he had Gorbachev always ready to make concessions. If Gorbachev or some other Soviet leader had instead tried to defy U.S. policy, to ride out the Reagan challenge, you would have begun to hear Americans say, “You know, this Reagan maximalism has not brought us any benefits. It’s bogged us down in an ideological and geopolitical confrontation where we have to spend too much on defense, where we are constantly trying to check the Soviets at this or that spot in the third world. And with what payoff?” So, Reagan’s ability to avoid an unsuccessful war was part of the explanation of how he managed to avoid the usual fate of maximalism. But there’s more. He could easily have faced the same kind of backlash against his policies except for the fact that Gorbachev kept showing that maximalism worked.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Then Bush Sr. came in and said that Reagan had been too gentle, and he decided to put Moscow on the defensive. Can you talk a bit about that, particularly the process of German reunification?

**Sestanovich:** We tend to forget that in 1989 Bush and his advisers thought Reagan was a softie and a dupe. That he’d been taken in by Gorbachev’s good guy rhetoric. That the Western alliance needed a little spine stiffening. That’s what they thought. It prepared them for a very aggressive approach to German reunification when it happened. At the time there was confusion throughout Europe about how to deal with the collapse of East Germany and the other Soviet satellite regimes. France, England, Poland, the Soviet Union were all terrified by the prospect of German reunification. I think it might not have happened, and certainly not in the way it did, but that the United States felt confident it could manage the process, that it was powerful enough to deal with a reunited Germany, and considered other countries’ fears to be the result of their own weakness. Another example of how American presidents tend to disregard the outlook of other countries.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And they created the Two Plus Four Agreement as a façade for cooperation . . .

**Sestanovich:** George Bush had the good manners and the ingratiating personal style that made it possible for him to suggest to other leaders that he was taking their views into account. But he often did the exact opposite. He ignored their views and usually didn’t tell them he was doing so. Many of the successful moves of American policy in the period of German reunification involved deception—not leveling with our close allies—not to mention our new friend Gorbachev.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Is this something our allies hold against us?

**Sestanovich:** The many decades since World War II have taught West European governments that you cannot always count on the United States to consult fully and take your views into account. What softens that resentment is respect for what American policies have in fact done for Europe. But there is a just-below-the-surface frustration that is the product of being ignored and marginalized again and again.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And Obama came into office with the intent to change all that, to consider our allies, to build bridges. But even if you look at the way the Iran negotiations went down, you will see that it was only the U.S. and Iran that mattered.



President and Mrs. Truman with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran.





2013 Geneva negotiations with P5+1 and Iranian foreign ministers.

**Sestanovich:** When it comes to a diplomatic crunch, American leaders tend to think they have to make their own decisions. The instance you're referring to, the parallel secret talks between the United States and Iran, is a perfect example. The United States liked the legitimacy—the PR value—that came from participating in a multilateral forum, the P5+1. But it didn't have confidence that the forum would produce good results. To get a good deal—to get any deal—you have to go into the back room with the Iranian negotiators themselves.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** As a former diplomat, what do you think of this?

**Sestanovich:** It would be great if we could make multilateralism work better and get other countries to make more enduring and constructive contributions to good causes. But it's awfully hard to do, so the choice that American leaders make to go their own way and follow their own calculus has for decades been nearly unavoidable. The question for the future is, will we still be able to produce, on our own, the kinds of good results that we have been able to achieve over the years? I think there is a compelling argument to be made that it will be harder for the United States to do that. But that doesn't give me a lot of confidence that others are going to step up. It may be that we end up with more regular under-performance, with more problems that don't get solved.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** The rise of China is a big factor in this. And one of the things Obama did very successfully in the beginning of his presidency was to increase our presence in East Asia and check China's rise a little bit. Is that going to fall to the wayside now that we're involved in so many other foreign policy issues?

**Sestanovich:** China's rise still looms very large in the thinking of American policy makers. What's a little less clear is whether there are the resources to back up that policy, the commitment of time and attention and even sometimes risk taking that will be necessary to make it work. Obama was not wrong that America's focus on the Middle East had taken a toll on its ability to balance China in East Asia. But that element of his policy is still a work in progress.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** You've pointed out that retrenchment presidents, like Obama, tend to devise strategies they hope can sustain us for the long haul. Can you elaborate?

**Sestanovich:** Retrenchment presidents are sometimes our more strategic leaders. They face a situation where in straitened circumstances the United States has to solve a problem that can't be fixed simply by doing more. They need to be subtle, they need to maneuver; they need to figure out how to get other powers to help with the solution. They need to calm the American public. And you're right: they tend not to think of this adjustment as a short-term fix. They think they can offer an alternative to oscillation, to the dramatic swings of American policy between over-commitment and under-commitment. They think they can find that steady level of American involvement in the world that will protect our interests and advance essential goals, without making a mess. Retrenchment presidents tend to be confident that they can do all that, but they too get bogged down. Just like maximalist presidents, they overdo it. They become overconfident in their ability to fine-tune policy.


They also become rather irritable in response to criticism. We think of Dwight Eisenhower as a genial, grandfatherly figure. But he was deeply annoyed by the challenges to his decision making. He thought he had established his credentials in a lifetime of successful involvement in foreign policy. So when people said to him, "You are ignoring



President Harry S. Truman, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin seated prior to a Potsdam Conference meeting in Germany in July 1945.



President Barack Obama holds a cabinet meeting in July 2012.



the challenges that we face in Berlin, in the strategic arms competition, in East Asia, in Cuba, in the Middle East,” he was pissed off. You see something of the same irritation on Obama’s part. He thinks a lot of the criticism against him is just poorly thought through and doesn’t reflect a serious weighing of costs and benefits. Both Eisenhower and Obama are impressively thoughtful leaders, but you don’t win people over by being irritated as president. They both lost ground because they were unwilling to listen to what their critics said.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** You call Eisenhower a “prisoner of his own super secrecy.”

**Sestanovich:** This was a surprise for me in writing the book. Retrenchment presidents are unusually strong and secretive managers of policy. They distrust the bureaucracy. They think disasters occur when the foreign policy establishment isn’t disciplined by the president, so they want to make all the big decisions. Eisenhower felt he alone should decide when the United States would threaten nuclear weapons and mean it, and when it would bluff. This tended to confuse people. If you’re too secretive about your reasons and unwilling to explain why one crisis requires a response and others do not, your supporters lose confidence in you. In your “red lines,” you might say. Eisenhower, Nixon, Obama have experienced this problem in quite similar ways.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Our post–World War II involvement in the Middle East started with Eisenhower. What lessons can we draw from that period?

**Sestanovich:** Eisenhower’s 1958 intervention in Lebanon is an interesting case study for thinking about what Obama faces in the Middle East today. After the Suez Crisis, in which he had undercut U.S. allies, Eisenhower wanted to send a rather simple message to Arab leaders, and to the Soviet Union, that America was not disengaging from the region. He thought a lightning intervention—America’s first in the Middle East—would serve his purposes. He would show U.S. power but withdraw quickly so as not to get bogged down. We could compare this story to the way in which Obama intervened in Libya in 2011. A quick in and out. No enduring effort. Unfortunately Obama doesn’t have the luxury of just sending messages like that. He can’t signal commitment through a lightning intervention the way Eisenhower did. Today the U.S. policy predicament is much harder to manage. Obama’s got both allies and adversaries in the region that are not sure of the extent of American commitment and want to see it demonstrated before they change their policies. It’s in part that kind of questioning of American staying power that has pushed Obama to greater involvement in Syria and Iraq.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Obama’s former senior advisers, Clinton and Panetta, for instance, were advocating long ago that he should arm Syrian rebels, and he didn’t decide to do so until now. He says it’s not because of the beheadings. Why do you think he switched course and do you think it’s the right course?

**Sestanovich:** During his first term Obama became more confident that he could fashion a strategy different from what I call “Clintonism.” By that I mean the set of assumptions followed by Bill Clinton and his advisers in making the United States an indispensable nation—the international problem solver of first resort. “Indispensable nationalism” was not Obama’s outlook, and he sought to develop something a little more stripped down and austere but still effective. His light footprint strategy was okay on the way out of Iraq and Afghanistan, and okay, too, in reducing American involvement in Yemen and Pakistan. But it has been a much less successful answer to the region-wide upheaval of





U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Kyiv, Ukraine, on March 4, 2014. The photos are of those killed at Maidan.

the “Arab Spring.” Bit by bit Obama has found himself pushed toward policies that look more like Clintonism—that is, toward deeper involvement. He is not yet abandoning his light footprint approach for good. He obviously still hopes he can make that work in some way. That’s why he keeps saying, “This isn’t the war in Iraq; this isn’t the war in Iraq.” But I think he’s found it somewhat difficult to persuade people that he’s got a strategy for limiting American involvement while still achieving American aims.

In all this, Obama faces the classic problems of a retrencher who has cleaned up the mess, more or less, that he inherited and now faces new challenges that he isn’t quite ready for and weren’t a part of the case that he presented to the American people in getting elected. All retrenchment presidents have to make this pivot. They tend to be weaker in dealing with what comes next. It’s hard to remember that just two years ago when he got reelected people thought Obama’s foreign policy was a fabulous success.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** What are your thoughts on how Obama is handling the crisis in Ukraine?

**Sestanovich:** As different as the crisis in Ukraine is from what we face with ISIS, it’s had the same impact on Obama’s foreign policy. They remind everyone of the adverse consequences of American disengagement and call for a reassertion of leadership. Still, Obama’s response in Ukraine has also had its innovative side. He has insisted that this kind of problem requires a collective solution. He has put the emphasis on coalition building, on getting others to pull their weight. He has challenged Europeans to do more, to push back against Putin.

Against ISIS, his answer has been the same: he says others have to forge a coalition. It’s still hard to tell whether this is a fig leaf for what will turn out to be essentially an American response. For now, however, you see Obama’s own strategic instincts at work. He is wary of over-commitment by the United States; he doesn’t want to pay the whole bill himself. Other governments are supposed to show that they are prepared to carry a larger part of the burden. The president is thoughtful about this: he knows our friends have been free riders of American security policy for decades. Analytically, he’s right, of course. But there is a difference between being a thoughtful analyst and being an effective leader. We don’t yet know whether his policy toward Ukraine or his policy in the Middle East is going to look successful in six months or a couple of years out.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** And do you think this is the right course of action in Ukraine?

**Sestanovich:** For my money, it will be important to show Putin that what he’s done in Ukraine is a costly mistake. That means, at a minimum, sustaining sanctions that have been put in place, keeping Russia on the defensive, and possibly even increasing the costs. It is going to mean more support for Ukraine itself, both economic and military.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** Do you advocate direct military involvement?

**Sestanovich:** Right now Ukraine does need help in upgrading its defense capabilities. That doesn’t require American troops, and it doesn’t require a whole lot of American equipment, but it does require some. If the Ukrainians don’t build up the capacity to hold off the Russians in Eastern Ukraine, the Russians will continue to make trouble there.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** What do you think of the argument that the reason we are in this mess to begin with is because the U.S. mishandled its foreign policy toward Russia by ignoring it as a great power, expanding NATO and placing missiles in Eastern Europe?





President Obama discusses the situation in Ukraine with Russian President Vladimir Putin, March 2014.



**Sestanovich:** I don't agree with that. Sure, some aspects of American policy have been intensely irritating to Russian leaders. But I also feel that, on balance, the United States has gained more than it has lost by enlarging its alliance into Eastern Europe. The issue of Ukraine's membership in NATO has not been well handled. But the person who has inflamed the situation more than anyone is Putin himself. Ukraine's membership in NATO basically ceased to be a live issue years ago. It had very little support in the alliance and some implacable opponents. Ukraine's own leaders had more or less dropped it too. They saw that it was too divisive for the country to handle. Putin has revived it as an issue for cynical domestic political motives. People who say Putin feels angry about enlargement have a small bit of truth to work with. But did he really feel threatened? That's much harder to believe. We've learned over time that taking Putin at his word is not always wise.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** What are Putin's motives? Is he trying to rally domestic support? Is he reacting to the threat of Ukraine's Westernization?

**Sestanovich:** Putin clearly has great ambitions for Russia. He would like it to be a larger power, more influential and respected in the world scene. The question is how much he's prepared to do to achieve that, and will his goals come at the expense of other countries' independence and interests. Does Russian greatness in his mind depend on regaining control over some of its neighbors?

Putin has the familiar goals of any politician: to stay in power, to counter challenges to his rule, to build up the economy, to expand influence internationally. All of that had a relatively pragmatic feel in his earlier years. What's been disturbing more recently is the belligerent nationalism that has become an integral part of Putinism. For many people in Europe who thought of Putin as a politician not so different from themselves—maybe a creepy little guy, but still someone you could work with—the past few months have been a shock. He has undermined confidence in himself among people who felt he was a difficult, but not reckless, leader. This has been very damaging for him, and I don't see how he's going to undo it.

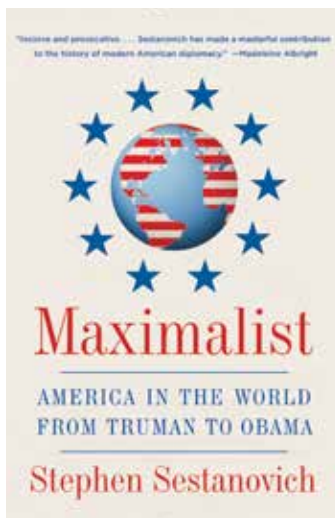
**Udensiva-Brenner:** And what can we learn from containment?

**Sestanovich:** Containment teaches that, most importantly, you have to have stable societies on your side of the line. Applied to Ukraine, that would mean making sure that outside of the small swath of territory claimed by Russian commandos, the country is a going concern: that the economy revives, that the political leadership is supported by a national consensus, and that the country restores some of the underlying unity it enjoyed for twenty years. Long before the U.S. challenged Soviet control of Eastern Europe, it fortified friendly, democratic societies in Western Europe. There is a clear lesson for us here. If Ukraine succumbs to economic crisis, to political disunity, and outside meddling, we will have a much more turbulent region in which it's much harder to sustain effective American policy.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** After the Cold War ended, Clinton was looking for some way to define American policy, and he said: Give me something you can put on a bumper sticker. If you had to define the ideal American foreign policy and were tasked with putting it on a bumper sticker, what would that bumper sticker say?

**Sestanovich:** This is a very important question. I don't expect to write the bumper sticker myself, but for the next two years our political debate is going to be about what

that bumper sticker says. Anybody who has half an idea of running for president has to come up with a foreign policy that will be attractive to the American people. In her interview with Jeff Goldberg in *The Atlantic*, Hilary Clinton suggested that she will present a program to the American people that has both a domestic and a foreign policy component. She had some bumper sticker phrases. Prosperity and security are obviously going to be the key elements of what she offers the American people. The other presidential candidates, both Republican and Democrat, have to do the same thing. Typically American presidents have prosperity and security on their bumper sticker. The question is whether they propose to achieve them by doing more or doing less. My sense is that the 2016 candidates are going to lean slightly in favor of doing more, but the debate is only starting. The American people may turn out to be in favor of doing less, of continued retrenchment. That's what's going to make this story interesting. □



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