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BOOK REVIEW

Bill burns and the lost art of diplomacy

The back channel: a memoir of American diplomacy and the case for its renewal random house, by Williams Burns, New York, Random House, 2019, \$32.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780525508861

What role does professional diplomacy play in shaping outcomes that matter to the United States in the world? One would think the answer is obvious – quite a lot. Effective statecraft is critical to avoiding war and reducing intrastate tensions. If war should emerge, however, military victory often relies on decades of cumulative diplomatic spadework to put a country in a position to win. Building and maintaining alliances, a critical variable in both war and peace, is impossible without a cadre of thoughtful, creative, and professional diplomats.

If you were to look at the major international relations journals and courses taught at leading universities, however, you might see far less evidence of its importance than you would expect. For example, years ago, a political scientist friend shared an article he co-authored for a prestigious journal laying out what he saw as the crucial factors that led to the United States prevailing against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.¹ The fascinating essay focused on the unique institutional relationships that developed in America between various entities, highlighting four variables that they believed paved the way to success: the relationship between the military and private industry, the competition between the branches of the armed services, civil-military interactions, and the links among military and scientific communities, including universities.

All of these factors seemed important, I replied. But what about American diplomacy? Wasn't successful statecraft a key variable in the outcome desired by the United States? My friend was dismissive. The article's analysis was revealing:

Historians seeking lessons from the Cold War tend to focus of the management of its crises, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and such moments of great political drama as the Cuban missile crisis. But successful crisis management depends on the unique personalities of the presidents and their most senior advisers. Because crisis management is so personality-driven, little can be learned about the institutional relationships that were crucial to winning such a long societal test by examining the Cold War's most dangerous moments. The real lessons of the showdown both for the management of future big-power confrontations and for the rest of government come from studying the management of defense resources: the day-to-day

¹Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Allen Kaufman. 'Security Lessons from the Cold War', *Foreign Affairs* 78/4 (1999), 77–89. doi:10.2307/20049366.

business of weapons procurement, the continuous mobilization of political support, and the preparation for a long war.²

Professional diplomacy was not simply forgotten or overlooked in the analysis. It was dismissed as an unpredictable, personality driven, impossible to institutionalize; an unimportant variable shaping outcomes in the world. Unfortunately, looking over syllabi of international relations courses, the article's bias was not unique. While many classes spent weeks on important subjects such as coercion, deterrence, theories of international politics, and even crisis management, the attention devoted to professional diplomacy – how it varied and why it mattered – was meager.

This situation seemed crazy to me. Consider the most important, dangerous, and complex issue of statecraft that vexed the United States during the Cold War: how to manage the status of Germany after the Second World War.³ Germany's aggression in the previous half century had caused untold misery and suffering for Europe. Its neighbors – East and West alike – understandably wanted it constrained, if not put down forever. A healthy German economic and political recovery, however, was crucial to rebuilding a prosperous, stable, and successful Europe. More alarming, a crushed and deflated Germany would create a power vacuum in the heart of a continent that the malevolent Soviet Union would ruthlessly exploit for its own imperial gain, likely pushing Western Europe into cowed neutrality, if not worse. Somehow, the United States had to construct a system that allowed the part of Germany it controlled – the West – to recover economically and politically without threatening its neighbors. And bitter, disillusioned West Germans had to be convinced to go along, to sign up for a project that meant they could participate in the recovery of the continent and defense of Western Europe while not receiving full sovereignty or possessing the most important military weapon – the atomic bomb. All this had to be done while the Soviet Union made threats and promises to Germany, including dangling the prospect of German unification, at the seemingly small cost of abandoning America's plans.

Creative American statecraft built innovative programs and institutions, including the Marshall Plan and NATO, that rehabilitated, reformed, and integrated West Germany into the western alliance without allowing its recovery to alarm its neighbors, east or west. None of this was easy or inevitable.⁴ The United States could have returned home from Europe and let the continent deal with the German question and fend for itself. It was simply enough to recall a different set of diplomatic choices the United States had made after World War I to recognize how consequential America's statecraft during the Cold War was.⁵

²Ibid., p. 79.

³The best study of this issue is Marc Trachtenberg. *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999).

⁴On NATO, see Timothy Andrews Sayle. *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2019); on the Marshall Plan, see Ben Steil. *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2018).

⁵Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* (New York: Penguin 2014).

While constructing these headline institutions was crucial, it was only part of the story. Managing the cross-cutting political, economic, and security interests between West Germany, America's allies, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe required decades of often painstaking, incremental, but professional statecraft by numerous diplomats working under administrations of vastly different ideological stripes. It demanded difficult tradeoffs and unintended consequences rarely understood outside the inner world of diplomats: The United States begrudgingly supported France's ultimately disastrous policies in Southeast Asia in larger measure to win their support for America's German policy during the early 1950s. While this work rarely made the front pages of the *New York Times*, to say nothing of the history books, these decades long, nonpartisan, careful processes of generating trust, linkages, and goodwill created the conditions whereby the George H.W. Bush administration could successfully lead the extraordinary efforts to peacefully integrate a reunified Germany within NATO as the Cold War came to an end.⁶

I have no doubt that MIT's Lincoln Lab or Caltech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, or the rivalry between the Air Force and the Navy over what fighter plane each would purchase, was important to America's effort during the Cold War. These forces, however, pale compared to the benefits that come from wise, forward-looking, and well-implemented American statecraft in advancing America's interest in the world.

The fundamental importance of effective, thoughtful diplomacy for advancing America's interests the world – and the potential disasters that could emerge if these practices dissipate – is the powerful and especially timely message of William Burns' important new book, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for its Renewal*. Burns is the president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and served in numerous countries and diplomatic positions in his storied career. Ostensibly, the book is a memoir, a recounting of Burns' fascinating life and experiences in the Foreign Service and State Department. From Amman to Moscow to the 7th floor at Foggy Bottom, Burns has participated in some of the most interesting diplomatic efforts of recent history. As a memoir, it is an engaging, interesting read, and I can't imagine a better recruiting tool to convince young people to join the U.S. Foreign Service.

The Back Channel accomplishes far more, however. The book provides a history of U.S. foreign policy since the late 1970s. It contributes to ongoing debates over the nature of world order and America's role in the world. Most importantly, Burns offers much-needed advocacy and instruction in the arts of diplomacy and statecraft, highlighting how this complex, subtle, misunderstood, but vitally important craft is essential to America's success and safety in the world.

This comes through especially clearly in the second chapter of the book on the George H.W. Bush years. Managing German unification within NATO and the peaceful end of the Cold War were only the two most important of a slew of extraordinary diplomatic accomplishments, ranging from groundbreaking arms

⁶Philip Zelikow and Condoleeza Rice. *To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New York: Twelve 2019).

control agreements to peace initiatives in global war zones ranging from Cambodia to El Salvador to the Middle East, while also assembling a large multinational coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a veritable dream team of smart diplomats at all levels working under both James Baker at the State Department and Brent Scowcroft at the National Security Council: Robert Zoellick, Bob Blackwill, Dennis Ross, Phil Zelikow, Condi Rice, Francis Fukuyama, even a fresh-faced college intern Derek Chollet, among many others. This group rivaled the diplomats of the Truman administration during the early years of the Cold War for their savvy and accomplishments.

This impressive success, however, generates a troubling puzzle that lies close to the surface throughout *The Back Channel*. The diplomacy Burns and his colleagues pursued mattered enormously, affecting the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world and shaping a global order that, while far from perfect, generated decades of prosperity and, if not peace, the absence of the horrors of great power war. Most importantly, these diplomats successfully advanced core American interests under trying, uncertain circumstances. In a world where the United States had given less thought to careful diplomacy, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new international system could have gone quite badly. Despite these successes, however, Bush was soundly defeated in his 1992 re-election effort. Worse, these important accomplishments were hardly even part of the larger public debate, which unfortunately fits in with a larger pattern in American politics. Disastrously, the very values, skills, and vision that often produced these results have been fading from the scene, with little political resonance.

This is not, as we know, a unique story. Why does effective statecraft appear to count for so little in American political life? Why does the United States pour orders of magnitude more resources into its military capabilities than its diplomacy? And how can we better connect the benefits of wise statecraft for our democracy to the concerns and interests of its citizens? Finding an answer to this vital question lies at the heart of Burns' effort.

To be fair, Americans have never properly appreciated the art of diplomacy. The early republic was riven by bitter political fights over early efforts to stabilize relations with powerful European nations during a dangerous time of global chaos and turbulence. The 1795 Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, Between His Britannic Majesty and the United States of America, more commonly known as the Jay Treaty, was, from the viewpoint of imaginative statecraft, an impressive diplomatic effort by the new nation, still weak and vulnerable.⁷ It was scorned by Thomas Jefferson and his allies as selling out America's values and interests, generating a bitter, divisive political fight. An equally impressive diplomatic effort to renew the agreement, the Monroe-Pickney Treaty of 1806, was rejected by President Jefferson, leading to the disastrous Embargo Act and providing one of the main causes for the War of 1812.⁸

⁷Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1961).

⁸Donald R Hickey, 'The Monroe-Pickney Treaty of 1806: A Reappraisal', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44/1 (1987), 65–88. doi:10.2307/1939719.

Things got little better, even as the nation became more powerful. In 1853, Secretary of State William Marcy required American diplomats abroad to wear plain black evening clothes, the 'simple dress of an American citizen,' inducing scorn and ridicule in foreign capitals.⁹ In the so-called Gilded Age, when the American economy was the largest in the world, the government still hesitated to bestow the title ambassador on its foreign representatives, seeing the term (and the practice) as too pretentious. As it emerged as world power after the Civil War, the State Department only had a staff of less than 50 people.¹⁰ As an excellent unpublished essay by Phil Zelikow recounts, Woodrow Wilson made perhaps the most momentous decision in the history of American foreign policy – intervening in World War I – with almost no diplomatic staff support, often working at cross purposes with his own secretary of state and eclectic advisor, Edward 'Colonel' House. The United States also often allowed trade to drive its diplomacy and saw its religious missionaries as more important global ambassadors than professional diplomats.¹¹

Henry Kissinger has brilliantly laid out why the United States often takes such a problematic stance towards diplomacy: As a proselytizing nation founded upon universal values and principles, the necessary art of compromise that is crucial to successful statecraft does not always come easily. Americans often understand the world as a place of problems to be solved, when many of the most difficult challenges faced by statesmen are irresolvable issues to be managed. The geopolitical equilibrium that emerges from a balance of power, a core principle of diplomacy throughout the world, is often seen as a corrupt European habit. Much of this is due to its unique history:

Americans inhabited a nearly empty continent shielded from predatory powers by two vast oceans and with weak countries as neighbors. Since America confronted no power in need of being balanced, it could hardly have occupied itself with the challenges of equilibrium even if its leaders had been seized by the bizarre notion of replicating European conditions amidst a people who had turned their backs on Europe.¹²

A further problem is that the skills that Burns argues are essential for effective diplomacy are often not prized in American political life. Americans love the loud, grand gesture and bold public strokes. As Burns convincingly argues, however, effective diplomacy depends upon qualities such as discipline, discernment, prudence, wisdom, patience, and incrementalism. Much of the work of diplomats is slow, quiet, and private – like the back channel referred to in the book's title. These attributes are seen by a fast-paced, immediate gratification culture as nutritious but boring, like vegetables. Who wants spinach when you can have birthday cake? This preference, though understandable, can lead to disaster, as

⁹Thadeus Russell, *A Renegade History of the United States: How Drunks, Delinquents, and Other Outcasts Made America* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2010).

¹⁰<https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/buildings/section25>.

¹¹A good overview of the history of American foreign relations is George Herring. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press 2008).

¹²Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, Simon & Schuster 1995).

Burns' chapter on the 2003 Iraq war – the ultimate case of bold, loud, public action over slow, patient, quiet, careful diplomatic work – painfully reveals.

Perhaps Burns' most important argument is that effective diplomacy – or its absence – matters greatly to the lives of millions of normal Americans. Washington has an obligation to connect what happens in the world to the concerns of main street. Diplomacy is easily dismissed in part because its practitioners have long been seen as elite, cosmopolitan, and condescending, out of touch with the concerns and interests of everyday citizens. Much of this is unfair, of course. But consider the diplomat often held up in the highest esteem by professors and policymakers, George Kennan. There is no doubting Kennan's grand strategic vision and insight, best reflected in the famous X article laying out the outlines of the containment strategy the United States would pursue against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Yet Kennan was also an odd, disagreeable figure, who disliked popular modern developments including the automobile, television, urbanization, and integration. He was a deep critic of everyday American culture and society.¹³ His influence waned dramatically after his start in policy planning, and his experience as the U.S. Ambassador to Yugoslavia demonstrated he was not an especially effective diplomat. What does it say that the supposed lion of U.S. statecraft is someone whose views and sensibilities were so at odds with the interests and sensibilities of average Americans? As Burns makes clear, diplomacy is not, as is often imagined, like playing the board game Risk, but rather a human endeavor, based on relationships, empathy, and building trust, whose outcome is critical to the lives of all American citizens. This is a valuable, easily forgotten message.

Why does all this matter?

We live in an age of braggadocio, self-absorption, and bombast. This goes beyond President Donald Trump. Consider another book about diplomacy that was published around the same time as *The Back Channel: George Packer's hagiography of Richard Holbrooke, Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*.¹⁴ Packer's book has received more attention, praise, and discussion. On one level, this is puzzling. Holbrooke was viewed by many, to put it mildly, as an especially flawed human being. The book – written by a friend and admirer – makes it clear that Holbrooke possessed a massive ego, was grasping, lied, cheated, was disloyal, unpleasant, impatient, and rude. Nor is it all that clear that he accomplished all that much as a diplomat over a long but erratic, inconsistent career. Yet Holbrooke and his idea of diplomacy is often strangely – and to my mind, wrongly – lionized.

While admittedly it is not surprising that Burns looks good in a book he wrote about himself, the qualities of being measured, humble, even kind, do come through. There is none of the score settling or boasting that mark similar efforts. Examples of loyalty, discretion, and modesty emerge throughout the book. Burns

¹³Even a sympathetic biography cannot hide Kennan's unfortunate views or unpleasant personae, or how at of touch he was with his own country. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Press 2011).

¹⁴George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2019).

says little about his own talents and accomplishments, but is full of praise for other people (as far as I can tell, the only negative comments he has are for Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and Doug Feith). He is deeply respectful of different arguments and perspectives, even on policies he disagreed with, such as the invasion of Iraq and the expansion of NATO. The qualities he emphasizes for successful diplomacy – humility and modesty, empathy, curiosity, discretion, thoughtfulness, prudence – are the very values that are in such short supply in the age of outrage, self-promotion, and Twitter.

We see the effect of the rejection of these values everywhere, as America's standing in the world falls faster than its relative material power. As Burns states, 'The value of American leadership is no longer a given – at home or abroad.' The consequences of inattentive or ineffective U.S. diplomacy resonate around the globe, from Kashmir to the weakening transatlantic alliance to the dangerously deteriorating relationship between the United States and China. Consider something that is not front-page news: the troubled relationship between Japan and South Korea. For decades, countless U.S. diplomats from administrations of all stripes understood the necessity of coaxing these two critical American allies to overcome their deep, long-held suspicions and enmity to work together in common cause. One imagines that for American diplomats shuttling between Seoul and Tokyo year after year, listening patiently to the same complaints, this work could seem frustrating. But it was necessary and important. In the absence of the slow, steady, empathetic, and trust-building diplomacy that Burns advocates, one sees the results – a Japan and South Korea that increasingly view each other as adversaries, to what one imagines is the delight of Beijing. Who knows what the consequences of this absence of effective diplomacy, in East Asia or elsewhere, will be years from now?

Burns' quiet but powerful brief on behalf of thoughtful diplomacy should be taken seriously. A good start would be in the academy. Much work needs to be done. As Phil Zelikow explains in an important paper published in *Texas National Security Review*, the 'the quality of U.S. policy engineering is actually much, much worse in recent decades than it was throughout much of the 20th century.'¹⁵ There are a variety of efforts to revitalize the study of diplomacy and statecraft, including at my own institution. Zelikow has teamed up with Francis Fukuyama, Ann-Marie Slaughter, and other policy academics to lay out an agenda to improve the way universities teach and train future policymakers and statespeople.¹⁶ A bigger and far more important step, however, would be for a presidential candidate to make the return to thoughtful, principled, effective American diplomacy a more central part of our national conversation. At first blush, this is unlikely to seem very appealing: there has been almost no serious discussion of foreign policy and diplomacy in the Democratic primary as of yet. It is not a very exciting subject in an age where many young people on both the left and the

¹⁵Philip Zelikow, 'To Regain Policy Competence: The Software of American Public Problem-Solving', *Texas National Security Review* 2/4 (2019).

¹⁶'Statement on Education for Public Problem Solving', <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publicproblemsolving/docs/statement-education-public-problem-solving>.

right feel the United States is both vastly overcommitted in the world and prone to make things worse, and would prefer the United States turn further inward.

Yet there is an opportunity. In truth, there is little a new administration can do to affect the profound social, demographic cultural, and identity issues that roil our times. Many of the major policy issues that most affect people's day to day lives – K-12 education, adult skills training, local economic development, transportation, criminal justice, housing – are largely shaped at the state and local level or driven by the private sector. Complex issues of identity, culture, and even technology lay largely outside the effective reach of federal policy. Where the president and the advisors she or he selects matters most, where the consequences of their leadership – or lack thereof – resound most powerfully, with the greatest long-term consequences, is in how America engages the world. A lack of attention to diplomacy shaped by the principles Burns lays out, will, in the long run, lead to a world less hospitable to America's values and interests, with bad consequences for its citizens. As Burns states, 'Effective diplomacy begins at home, but it ends there, too – in better jobs, more prosperity, a healthier climate, and greater security ... Its rebirth is crucial to a new strategy for a new century, one that is full of great peril and even greater promise for America.' Perhaps even more importantly a return to the values, sensibilities, and practices Burns commends – prudence, modesty, discretion, discipline, empathy, patience – could be exactly what a weary, dispirited nation needs to rediscover its optimism and belief in itself.

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