



WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE DOING?

Francis J. Gavin

In his introduction to Volume 7, Issue 2, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, considers why the United States seems stuck in the Middle East and suggests that Washington refocus on core grand-strategic interests. More broadly, he calls on Americans to find ways to passionately *and* respectfully discuss difficult issues.

I have two dear friends — let's call them Ike and Bob — who have very different driving styles. Ike drives quite slowly and cautiously, keeping his speed well below the limit while braking as soon as a yellow light appears in the distance. Bob, on the other hand, drives fast and aggressively, like his hair is on fire.

In and of itself, this is not unusual. Ike and Bob, however, think that how people drive reflects larger issues with the state of humanity and our disordered world. Ike believes that the fast, rude, rule-breaking drivers he regularly encounters symbolize people's profound selfishness and the world's increasing lack of concern for others. Bob, on the other hand, views the slow, meandering drivers, cyclists, and joggers blocking his way as self-absorbed and egocentric, reflecting a society where people do whatever they want, blithely unconcerned about the consequences. Since they are both kind enough to drive me places, I am regularly treated to their passionate jeremiads on driving etiquette and how it relates to the Fall of Man and the decline of civilization.

I usually have two reactions. First, I live in fear that at some point Ike and Bob are going to crash into each other, which will be highly awkward at best. Second, I point out to these highly intelligent, successful friends that how people drive reflects little else but how people drive. Hegel's world spirit is unlikely to be discovered in Washington, D.C.'s traffic patterns.

I also recommend what I call my "chambers-of-the-brain" strategy to them. I think of my conscious mind as having eight chambers, and when I am pursuing an activity I enjoy — having cocktails with Ike or Bob, reading a great book, writing a *Texas National Security Review* introduction — all eight chambers of my brain are firing. I feel, see, hear, and smell everything, am fully alive and emotionally invested. For less pleasant tasks, I power down these imaginary chambers. Sitting in faculty meetings, for example, I reduce to 50 percent capacity — four chambers on, four chambers off, enough to be vaguely aware of what is being discussed but not reacting to the meandering soliloquies commonplace among professors. Boarding an airplane, going to the dentist, phoning a call center, or driving might get me down

to three or even two chambers — hand-to-eye coordination intact, sight and sound functioning fully, breathing and heart-rate normal, but no emotional attachment or limbic brain reaction to whatever happens. If someone cuts me off or stops 500 yards before a yellow light, I take note, respond by doing what is safest, but mentally move on. I also discern no greater teleological lessons from the experience.

To be fair, those who know me best would point out that I probably only observe my own chambers-of-the-brain strategy in the breach. Like everyone else, plenty of phenomena generate outsized emotional reactions far beyond the intrinsic importance of the event involved. This is no surprise — it is our passion and emotion, as much as our reason, that makes us interesting as a species. The rational expectations revolution has misled us into thinking people and institutions calmly and judiciously identify and pursue their interests in a cold, calculating manner. If we were solely utility maximizers, however, if we could turn on and off the chambers of the brain at will, no one would root for their beloved sports team, line up for tickets to their favorite performer, invest in crypto, or fall in or out of love. And they would be less likely to go to war or to treat political disagreements as a blood sport.

Focusing on What Really Matters

I thought about Ike and Bob's driving worldviews when reading the sharp and informative exchange that the *Texas National Security Review* hosted for Galen Jackson's compelling new book *A Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967-1979*.¹ The Middle East is a subject where few appear to be able to adopt a chambers-of-the-brain strategy, and instead allow their passions to overtake sober, rational calculations. This has been especially true since the heinous Hamas attacks against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. Smart, insightful people offer sharply disagreeing views in heated language, while deriving world-historical morals where, upon calm reflection, there appear to be few.

On one level, such contested vehemence is a puzzle. Powering down the chambers of the brain, a

1 "Book Review Roundtable: Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Middle East," *Texas National Security Review*, March 19, 2024, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-lost-opportunities-for-peace-in-the-middle-east/>.



few observations would appear, at least to me, to be relatively straightforward:

- The Oct. 7 attacks on Israel were horrific, and Hamas's actions detestable.
- Israel has a right to defend itself vigorously, but it has responded in an especially brutal and — like the United States after the 9/11 attacks — self-defeating manner. This is depressingly unsurprising, as Israel's policy towards the Palestinian people has long been short-sighted, cruel, and grand-strategically bankrupt.
- The Palestinian people deserve a state and the opportunity to govern themselves, but their leadership has been persistently corrupt and incompetent, while also riven by deep and seemingly irreconcilable internal disagreements. Their plight is cynically exploited by neighbors in the region as well as political actors around the globe.
- The regime in Tehran is a noxious but, by traditional power metrics, impotent state. Carrying out your grand strategy via proxies is a sign of weakness, not strength.
- An alien from Mars might have difficulty determining whether Iran's domestic practices, foreign policy, and overall political legitimacy were that much worse than that of America's "ally," Saudi Arabia.
- Israel — possessing one of the world's most technologically advanced economies, overwhelming conventional military superiority, and well over 100 nuclear weapons — is far more imperiled by a domestic threat than any foreign adversary: namely a dramatic demographic shift that by the middle of the 21st century may see over half the country's population comprised of Haredim and Arabs,² groups who may not share the core historical mission and values of the Israeli state and its society.
- Antisemitism is shamefully all too real and persistent and must be called out and vigorously combatted.
- Outcomes in the Middle East have been and will continue to be largely determined by local actors, not external powers. Local actors have and will continue to exploit intervening external powers for their own narrow interests.
- While the when, how, who, and what are to be determined and will be contested, there *must*

eventually be serious negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and there exist instructive historical models that could provide guidance for their success (especially one published by the *Texas National Security Review*).³

- The recent crisis has revealed that institutions of higher education are a "hot mess," as the kids say, and their embarrassing failure to provide wisdom and guidance is, sadly, of little surprise to those who spend their days inside of them.⁴

I am not wedded to these views and am happy to listen to thoughtful arguments that point out where I am wrong. There is no reason such a discussion should be especially overheated. What many would consider controversial, however, is my answer to the question I care about most: What does any of the above have to do with core grand-strategic interests of the United States?

The United States has enormous global responsibilities and vast interests around the world, all of which generate risks and fears. When I look at our dangerous and chaotic world, I worry about a nuclear North Korea invading South Korea or lobbing a missile towards Japan, China blockading Taiwan or getting into a shoot-out with an American naval vessel in the South China Sea, or nuclear-armed Pakistan going to war against nuclear-armed India. I fear Russia detonating nuclear weapons in Ukraine or trying to attack a relatively indefensible NATO country like Estonia. In our own hemisphere, meanwhile, Venezuela threatens to seize parts of neighboring Guyana. Nearer to home, Haiti remains a perennial, seemingly intractable problem, diagnosed and discussed in "Stabilizing Haiti: A Guide for Policymakers" by Ian Murray and Chris Bernotavicius in this issue.⁵ Conflict and crisis in Ethiopia and Sudan put countless innocents at risk, as does the long-running, murderous conflict in central Africa. Yet, as John J. Chin and Haleigh Bartos point out in "Rethinking U.S. Africa Policy Amid Changing Geopolitical Realities," the United States is losing influence on the increasingly crucial continent to China and Russia in this critical region.⁶

And these are only the traditional, kinetic threats. I am on record as arguing that we vastly overrate geopolitical dangers, burdened by conceptual frames

2 Claudia De Martino and Ruth Hanau Santini, "Israel: a demographic ticking bomb in today's one-state reality," *Aspenia Online*, July 10, 2023, <https://aspensiaonline.it/israel-a-demographic-ticking-bomb-in-todays-one-state-reality/>.

3 For an excellent analysis of successful negotiations addressing a similarly difficult, contentious, and violent dispute — including how to time such discussions and the need to include the so-called "hard men" who perpetuated the violence — see James B. Steinberg, "The Good Friday Agreement: Ending War and Ending Conflict in Northern Ireland," *Texas National Security Review*, 2, Issue 3 (May 2019): 78-102, <https://tnsr.org/2019/05/the-good-friday-agreement-ending-war-and-ending-conflict-in-northern-ireland/>.

4 Francis J. Gavin, "Cracks in the Ivory Tower?" *Texas National Security Review*, 7, Issue 1 (Winter 2023/2024): 3-7, <https://tnsr.org/2024/01/cracks-in-the-ivory-tower/>.

5 Chris Bernotavicius and Ian Murray, "Stabilizing Haiti: A Guide for Policymakers," *Texas National Security Review*, 7, Issue 2 (Spring 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/03/stabilizing-haiti-a-guide-for-policymakers/>.

6 Haleigh Bartos and John J. Chin, "Rethinking U.S. Africa Policy Amid Changing Geopolitical Realities" *Texas National Security Review*, <https://tnsr.org/2024/05/rethinking-u-s-africa-policy-amid-changing-geopolitical-realities/>.

appropriate for 1904 or 1934 but wildly off the mark for 2024.⁷ Far more perilous are what I have called “the problems of plenty,” issues ranging from the climate catastrophe to the risks created by new technologies ranging from artificial intelligence to bioengineering.⁸ It is not clear, for example, that we have learned many lessons or adopted the needed policy reforms to prepare for the next, inevitable pandemic, a shocking oversight given that COVID-19 felled well over one million Americans and more than 20 million people worldwide.⁹ Gavin Wilde contends in “From Panic to Policy: The Limits of Foreign Propaganda and the Foundations of an Effective Response” that we need a better understanding and smarter policies to deal with disinformation spread by our adversaries.¹⁰ Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli, Antonio Ricchi, Aniello Russo, and Sandro Carniel explain in their brilliant analysis, “Climate Change and Military Power: Hunting for Submarines in the Warming Ocean,” that traditional and novel threats are interacting, as a warming sea inhibits the ability to track submarines.¹¹ These vexing challenges are taking place in a world where democratic governance and norms are under increasing pressure. As Luke J. Schumacher explains in “Franklin D. Roosevelt, World War II, and the Reality of Constitutional Statesmanship,” democracies face particular burdens when pursuing diplomacy — challenges that only increase during crises.¹²

In short, the United States does not lack for threats and responsibilities, and there is no need to seek trouble. Looking at America’s policies in the Middle East, a simple question emerges: What exactly are we doing? And to what end?

Grand strategy is about making difficult but smart choices where resources are anything but unlimit-

ed. Assets deployed on one problem or arena mean that another issue gets less focus. This includes the attention economy. Friends working in the Biden administration, possessing impressive knowledge of diverse subjects ranging from China to emerging technology to constructing scenarios for the future of world politics, have spent most of their long days and weekends since Oct. 7 responding and reacting to events in the Middle East. It would be much better if at least a few of these smart minds were thinking about what we should do if we wake up tomorrow and it’s 173 degrees outside, avian flu or something worse starts rapidly spreading, or Kim Jong Un becomes tired of being ignored and lobs a nuclear weapon at somebody. Instead, we are deploying our best and brightest to figuring out what the Houthis are up to.

The United States possesses more important core strategic and economic interests in the Americas, Europe, and East Asia.¹³ Africa is primed to be the source of great potential economic, demographic, and resource growth for the rest of the 21st century. How do America’s stakes in the Middle East stack up by comparison? When I ask colleagues why our massive national security bureaucracy — as well as our elite cultural institutions in journalism and higher education — are obsessed with the region, they struggle to provide a convincing answer. It’s certainly not democracy promotion. Thirty years ago, one might have responded “oil and gas.” Yet, answering “energy” overlooks the profound and often unrecognized consequences of the shale revolution. The United States is now the world’s largest fossil fuel producer, generating *twice* as much as the country in second place, Saudi Arabia, in 2023¹⁴ and more natural gas than all the states in the Persian Gulf combined.¹⁵ America is

7 Francis J. Gavin, “The World’s Biggest Crisis Is the End of Scarcity,” *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/16/end-of-scarcity-crisis-growth-war/>.

8 Francis J. Gavin, *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty: Rethinking International Relations and American Grand Strategy in a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2024), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/adelphi/2024/the-taming-of-scarcity-and-the-problems-of-plenty/>.

9 Philip Zelikow, “How to do statecraft,” *Engelsberg Ideas* (May 2, 2024), <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/how-to-do-statecraft/>.

10 Gavin Wilde, “From Panic to Policy: The Limits of Foreign Propaganda and the Foundations of an Effective Response,” *Texas National Security Review*, 2, Issue 7 (Spring 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/03/from-panic-to-policy-the-limits-of-foreign-propaganda-and-the-foundations-of-an-effective-response/>.

11 Andrea Gilli et al. “Climate Change and Military Power: Hunting for Submarines in the Warming Ocean,” *Texas National Security Review*, 2, Issue 7 (Spring 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/03/climate-change-and-military-power-hunting-for-submarines-in-the-warming-ocean/>.

12 Luke J. Schumacher, “Franklin D. Roosevelt, World War II, and the Reality of Constitutional Statesmanship,” *Texas National Security Review*, 2, Issue 7 (Spring 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/05/franklin-d-roosevelt-world-war-ii-and-the-reality-of-constitutional-statesmanship/>.

13 To be clear, this is not a call for American retrenchment: The United States should remain committed to Europe, East Asia, and the Americas, while assessing the increasing importance of Africa. To my mind, the touchstone piece for the restraint movement — Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky’s 1997 article, “Come Home America” — got things backwards, recommending an American withdrawal from Europe and the Middle East while keeping a military presence in the Persian Gulf. It was their article that first prompted me to wonder about how we got hopelessly stuck in a region, the Middle East, where — unlike Europe and East Asia — intrinsic American interests were negligible and our presence made things worse, not better. Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security*, 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997), https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2539282.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Ad9eda200c-148b76049230c4e3e8bd558&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

14 U.S. Energy Information Administration, “What countries are the top producers and consumers of oil?” April 11, 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6>.

15 Melissa Pistilli, “Top 10 Countries for Natural Gas Production,” *Investing News Network*, March 19, 2024, <https://investingnews.com/top-natural-gas-producers/>.



an energy exporter and hasn't needed fuel from the Middle East for years. Those who say that we need to be there to protect shipping lanes or supply chains miss the extraordinary ability of the global economy to seamlessly adjust to far more devastating global disruptions: Energy and food markets adapted quickly and efficiently to a devastating global pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The current Middle East crisis has hardly affected global oil prices.¹⁶

Ultimately, the greatest beneficiary of America's "stabilizing" military and political presence in the Middle East may be our rival, China, who is completely dependent upon the region for energy to fuel its growth.¹⁷ To those who worry that China would enter the region if we left, I would ask: how exactly has America's deep and costly engagement with the greater Middle East advanced U.S. interests and power since the end of the Cold War? If China wants to get bogged down in a Thomas Friedman-esque deal involving Israel and the Gulf States while containing Iran — allowing the United States to shift its resources to the far more vital and important issues facing America's core interests in Europe, East Asia, and yes, our own hemisphere, to say nothing of the far graver planetary challenges we are facing — I respond, Have at it, Hoss! Lots of luck in your senior year!¹⁸

Bad Precedent?

To understand why the United States is stuck in the Middle East, it is helpful to know some history. During the first two decades of the Cold War, the Middle East was considered a British responsibility, and the United States largely kept the region at arm's length. The 1967 Six-Day War changed all that. The conflict revealed that America's Cold War ideological and geopolitical rival, the Soviet Union, encouraged and supported the Arab attack on Israel to gain a foothold in the region. The ensuing oil shock worsened Britain's already precarious financial situation, causing it to devalue its currency and announce it was withdrawing from the region. The United States, trapped in an unwinnable war in Vietnam, could not put its own military forces on the ground. Lacking better choices and operating from a position of relative geopolitical weakness, Wash-

ington pursued its own "proxy" strategy, deepening strategic relations with three states — Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Shah's Iran — that were, to put it mildly, not problem-free. This was a shift in policy. The Kennedy administration, for example, was no fan of the Shah of Iran, and pushed him to reform and democratize, while sharply criticizing Israel for lying about its secret nuclear weapons program. In the years that followed the 1967 war, America's entanglement with the region deepened as, concurrently, the United States and its Western allies became increasingly dependent upon Middle Eastern oil. It was a costly strategy, involving the United States in civil wars and disputes it knew little about, making it a prisoner to the complex politics and inscrutable rivalries of the region, while earning the enmity of Iran after the Shah's fall. Viewed through a Cold War lens, however, one can reasonably argue that this grand strategy — even some of the more unsavory decisions — made some sense, as the Soviets were, for the most part, expelled from the region and oil kept flowing.

The Cold War's end should have caused American policymakers to re-evaluate their interests and commitment to the Middle East. As we know, it did not. A multitude of factors — from continuing oil dependency to the rogue behavior of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and revolutionary Iran to the ever elusive but endlessly tempting prospect of peace between the Israelis and Palestinians — kept the Americans in when perhaps they should have been out. Meanwhile, our presence and policies alienated many citizens of the region and offered motivation to terrorists. America's spasmodic bungling and overly militarized response to the 9/11 attacks saw the United States thoughtlessly redouble these efforts. To be fair, it is very hard for states to escape the sunk costs fallacy and cut their losses when a grand strategic commitment goes bad. One of my (and greatly missed Bob Jervis's) favorite *Texas National Security Review* articles, Alexandra Evans and Bradley Potter's "When Do Leaders Change Course? Theories of Success and the American Withdrawal from Beirut, 1983-84," illuminates how rare and complex a decision by a superpower to leave a strategic commitment can be.¹⁹ The irony of more recent U.S. policy in the region is that it was likely the fear that the United States was de-prioritizing the Middle East

16 Robert Buckland, "On markets and geopolitics, it is a mistake to forget about shale," *Financial Times*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/57b64b20-b1f4-4803-8793-5e86589480e8?emailId=ae30dbf9-2938-4ed9-bcb8-8e96fc4f839f&segmentId=13b7e341-ed02-2b53-e8c0-d9cb59be8b3b>.

17 Keith Bradsher, "China's Economic Stake in the Middle East: Its Thirst for Oil," *The New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/business/china-oil-saudi-arabia-iran.html>

18 Tamara Keith, "Biden had a sick burn in his State of the Union speech. 'Lots of luck' explaining it," *NPR*, Feb. 9, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/09/1155708499/biden-had-a-sick-burn-in-his-state-of-the-union-speech-lots-of-luck-explaining-i>.

19 Alexandra T. Evans and Bradley Potter, "When Do Leaders Change Course? Theories of Success and the American Withdrawal from Beirut, 1983-1984," *Texas National Security Review*, 2, Issue 2 (February 2019), 10-38, <https://tnsr.org/2019/02/when-do-leaders-change-course-theories-of-success-and-the-american-withdrawal-from-beirut-1983-1984/>.

that drove two historically adversarial states, Israel and Saudi Arabia, to cooperate. America's overweening presence has long allowed regional actors to misbehave without consequence.

Encouraging the United States to leave the Middle East is not the same as asking America to retrench its global grand strategy. Quite the contrary. Instead, it is a call to be clear-eyed and serious about the enormous challenges facing the United States and the world and to make smarter choices moving forward. I would prefer that Israel is safe, secure, and thriving, that the Palestinians have a vibrant, prosperous, and friendly state of their own, that the Iranian people overthrow their dreadful regime, that the Gulf States democratize, and that the world move decisively to end its planet-threatening addiction to fossil fuels. The United States, however, must prioritize and decide where and whether its intervention is helpful. In a world that is on fire, we must make sure we deploy our firehose where the flames are most threatening and likely to burn our own house. More to the point, we should make sure our hose is discharging water and not gasoline.

Let's Do Better

A reader might ask me: are you applying the same chambers-of-the-brain strategy to this issue yourself? It is a fair question. I confess I am angry — and not simply because years of unwise American grand strategy in the Middle East have weakened the United States while allowing new threats, traditional and planetary, to fester. I am also bothered by the reactions of our legacy institutions. Should we really be surprised that young people, no matter how misguided or historically misinformed about the Middle East, view the world differently than people my age or older? My oldest daughter was born six weeks before the 9/11 attacks on the United States. In her life, she has witnessed America's leaders squander the post-Cold War peace dividend, leaving her cohort with the consequences of at least two draining, ill-conceived wars in the greater Middle East and a burdensome global war on terror, the international financial crisis and increased inequality, an incompetent and deadly response to the COVID-19 pandemic, eroding reproductive rights, the rise of unregulated and crippling social media platforms, an untended opioid crisis, deep political polarization, and a melting planet, amongst a litany of other issues. Given what we've done to them, I am perhaps more willing to tolerate a knucklehead or two saying and doing dumb things on campus. There are lots of reasons young people are fed up — I suspect the crisis in Gaza is a proxy for a litany of resentments — but

America's disastrous grand strategies in the Middle East and its second- and third-order consequences on their lives rank high on the cause for their anger. My daughter and her friends can be forgiven if they aren't too keen to listen to lectures from Friedman, my national security colleagues, their university leaders, Hillary Clinton, a grifting Donald Trump, and an American president who was born less than a year after Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

The current debate over America's role in the Middle East is a lot like Ike and Bob's contrasting *Fahrvweltanschauung* or driving worldview — too extreme, too emotional, and carrying far too much teleological weight. What is needed is a calmer, cooler calculation while people and our institutions employ my patented chambers-of-the-brain strategy. Smart, decent people should be able to admire and root for Israeli society while harshly critiquing its government's inept grand strategy and to recognize and deplore antisemitism while wanting a better, safer, more prosperous life for Palestinians, all while asking how and why this has anything to do with the United States and whether our intervention is warranted or even makes things worse. And our universities are precisely where such important debates should take place in a reasoned, respectful, and serious manner.

If Ike and Bob are the model, however, there is hope. Ike and Bob are great human beings, and they think the world of each other. When I explained each possessed a view of driving that was 180 degrees at odds with the other, it gave them pause. I don't expect them to change their minds or, indeed, their driving habits, but I do notice them looking at the cars that they go by, making sure they don't crash into each other. Let us try to do the same as we passionately, and respectfully, discuss and debate such difficult issues. 🇺🇸

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Image: Mx. Granger²⁰