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Rasmussen's Refrain: Let Uncle Sam Do It

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Most scam artists take advantage of their victims' weaknesses. So it is with populous and prosperous Asian and European nations that have persuaded the United States to keep defending them long after they have any real need of protection. These "friends" rely on Washington's particular weaknesses—vanity, myopia, and arrogance. Tell American politicians that you can't live without them, and they will do everything for you.

Such is the basic message of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former NATO secretary general from Denmark, in a thin volume called *The Will to Lead*. Written before the November presidential election, it is filled with "I was there" anecdotes and platitudes advanced as arguments. Like politicians everywhere, the former Danish prime minister wants to spend other people's lives and money—in particular the lives and money of Americans.

In his view, only the United States can save the world. Never mind the cost: everyone else will cheer the U.S. along.

This is a bleak book. It opens with the words "Our world has reached the tipping point." Rasmussen cites a litany of horrors. Overall, "the village is burning."

As a result, he argues, "We need a policeman to restore order; we need a fireman to put out the fire; we need a mayor, smart and sensible, to lead the rebuilding." Three guesses on who they should be!

Not people in the countries themselves. Or regional powers. Or governments with the most at stake. Or international organizations. Or friendly coalitions. Or some combination of the foregoing. Rather, "We need America to play all these roles." It doesn't matter where, the nature of the conflict, or the degree of threat. Uncle Sam must simultaneously be firefighter, cop, and politician.

Before insisting that Americans sacrifice their lives and money to manage the globe, Rasmussen should offer some evidence that success is possible, at least at reasonable cost and effort. But Washington's attempt to mold the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa over the last nearly 16 years has been a catastrophe.

Not that Rasmussen noticed. In assessing U.S. war-making he is relentlessly upbeat. Even when U.S. officials cause geopolitical chaos, trigger sectarian war, strengthen hostile states, and destroy religious communities, he sees the positive. Indeed, he enthusiastically claims responsibility for encouraging some of Washington's worst decisions.

"The world needs a policeman to make sure that the international rules that shaped our world—and our prosperity—are honored," declares Rasmussen. Who but the United States can assume that role? But of course Uncle Sam as globocop actually means being the complainant, policeman, judge, jury, prison warden, and executioner in overseas adventures. No surprise that many countries on the receiving end of all this resist the self-anointed vigilante. The more reckless the "global policeman," the harder some nations will work to create deterrents for their own protection.

Where is the utopia resulting from Washington walking the world beat? Because of "determined American leadership" in the Balkans, Rasmussen writes, "within days, [U.S. diplomat Richard] Holbrooke was on the ground; within weeks, NATO planes were in the air; within months, a peace deal was on the table." Of course, the allies ignored inconvenient ethnic cleansing and atrocities against ethnic Serbs, especially in Croatia and Kosovo. They insisted that while every ethnic minority could break free from Serb-dominated states, Serb minorities were expected to remain cheerfully subject to abusive ethnic majorities. Europe continues to deal with the problems from the resulting artificial and dysfunctional states.

Rasmussen calls the invasion of Afghanistan "an act of self-defense, and fully justified." And it was—in terms of degrading al-Qaeda and ousting the Taliban regime that hosted the terrorist group. But spending more than 15 years attempting to build a stable, democratic, Western-oriented, centralized state in South Asia? Self-defense?

Yet Rasmussen lauds this geopolitical black hole, which continues to cost lives and resources. Naturally, he blames problems on inadequate effort: withdrawing troops too quickly (Americans obviously have endless time, money, and lives to expend in foreign wars); failing to more quickly build "strong and credible indigenous security forces" (if the allies had only tried a little harder, those ghost troops would have been real); and not doing enough to "build trust between the people and political leadership" (self-serving, violent, corrupt, incompetent local rule was the allies' fault).

Iraq was a grand crusade, wonderfully conceived. Saddam Hussein was "a brutal dictator"—not that that set him aside in a world filled with a variety of thugs, creeps, and brutes oppressing their peoples—and "would not abide by UN resolutions." Now that is a good reason for going to war! Admittedly, everything didn't turn out as expected (where were those vast stockpiles of WMDs?). But the problem was not the idea. Rather, "mistakes" included "the failure to prepare a

detailed and concrete plan for the reconstruction of the country and the reconciliation of its many ethnic and religious groups early enough.”

The notion that a more determined occupation or a few more billions tossed into the Iraqi void would have caused contending factions to circle the campfire singing “Kumbaya” is particularly fantastic. No “detailed and concrete plan” could have forced reconciliation. Yet the war, begun under false pretenses, killed and wounded tens of thousands of American and European military personnel and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians; drove millions of Iraqis from their homes; destroyed the historic Christian community; yielded a sectarian government in Baghdad; greatly enhanced Iranian influence in the region; spawned al-Qaeda in Iraq, which turned into the Islamic State; and shredded U.S. credibility worldwide. But never mind, it was “legal and justified,” Rasmussen assures us.

As NATO secretary general he backed intervention in Libya. It was another wonderful operation against a terrible dictator that, sadly, suffered because “the political follow-up was an abysmal failure.” If only someone had “stepped up,” no doubt the result would have been another tolerant Arab democracy allied with America, respectful of religious minorities, protective of civil liberties, and dedicated to fighting terrorism.

Not surprisingly, he was disappointed that the United States didn’t lead the way into the Syrian fray. There were arguments against joining another people’s civil war that posed no security threat to the West, he concedes, but no matter. They “could have been overcome with patient diplomacy, energetic engagement, and determined American leadership.” In this view, America easily could have engaged in a little nation-building after sorting out the multiple conflicts: Syrian government vs. insurgents; “moderate” fighters vs. radicals; religious minorities vs. Islamists; Turks vs. Kurds; and Saudi Arabia and Gulf States vs. Iran and Hezbollah. What could possibly go wrong?

Rasmussen doesn’t think much of “isolationism.” He claims: “History has shown time and again that the bulwarks of the oceans are no defense against a hostile and aggressive world. Imperial Germany proved it in 1917; imperial Japan did it again in 1940; al-Qaeda did it on 9/11.”

Rasmussen knows just enough history to be dangerous. Imperial Germany posed no threat to America. Why should the U.S. have sided with the entente, which included the Czarist despotism of Imperial Russia; revanchist France, which started the Franco-Prussian War; feckless Italy, which joined the conflict for territorial gain; and colonial Belgium, noted for its murderous misrule of Congo? Tragically, Washington’s involvement led to the Versailles Treaty, which set the stage for an even worse war a generation later.

Japan attacked America—in response to the latter’s imposition of a crippling economic embargo. Al-Qaeda struck the U.S. rather than Europe because the former actively warred against Muslim peoples and governments. Washington was Exhibit A in the problem of blowback. Rasmussen’s Denmark, far too small to attempt to reorder the globe, generally avoided making new enemies intent on wreaking vengeance.

Rasmussen calls for an “Alliance for Democracy.” He wants America’s president to “convene the world’s liberal democracies” to “coordinate their policies.” How very European. But does anyone really believe this would result in anything other than more dead trees?

“We who enjoy the privilege of living in free societies have an interest, and I would say an obligation, to promote freedom and democracy in the world,” he writes. That sounds great, but that’s not what Rasmussen’s book is about. *The Will to Lead* explains why *the U.S.* must embrace this hallowed obligation to promote freedom and democracy around the world. Why *Americans* should sacrifice lives and wealth. Why the answer to every international problem is *Washington’s* responsibility. And why if *the American people* would just demonstrate “the will to lead” all would be well.

Rasmussen is part of a cottage industry dedicated to ensuring that the United States fulfills the expansive role assigned by others. But Donald Trump’s election suggests there is little American support for promiscuous intervention. The people of this country should chart their own “destiny,” one which emphasizes protecting the lives, prosperity, and liberty of Americans.

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