

Anatomy of Failure: Why America Loses Every War it Starts

Harlan Ullman

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This comprehensive investigation reveals the complexities of foreign-policy making in the era of “no world order.”

Anatomy of Failure is Harlan Ullman’s enlightening assessment of the United States’s bleak record of losing all the wars it started since the second half of the twentieth century. The book demonstrates that a lack of knowledge about diplomatic history and ineffective strategic planning have caused presidents from John F. Kennedy to Donald Trump to inflame existing crises or spark new ones.

This richly detailed account reflects Ullman’s distinguished career as a swift-boat commander during the Vietnam War, through to his decades as an expert advisor to presidents and political officials, as well as his tenure as a foreign-policy scholar.

Each president’s record is thoroughly scrutinized, and only George H. W. Bush ends up being lauded for his planning and realistic goals; they led to a quick US victory in the 1991 Iraq War. Conversely, his son, George W. Bush, is indicted for blundering into the 2003 Iraq War in order to justify never-found weapons of mass destruction, in what Ullman calls “strategic incompetence of the highest order.”

Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, is criticized for a line-in-the-sand challenge to Syria’s Assad over his use of chemical weapons—a decree that was ignored by Syria and, Ullman says, resulted in diminished American credibility. President Trump, according to Ullman, is off to an inauspicious start; Twitter rants have worsened relations with North Korea, other enemies, and allies.

The book’s outstanding feature is its inclusion of dialogues among the author and presidents and members of the foreign-policy complex. Ullman is not afraid to mince words; he offers well-researched assessments that discomfort cliché-spouting authorities.

This comprehensive investigation reveals the complexities of foreign-policy making in the era of “no world order.” Ullman warns that the continued absence of strategic planning, coupled with the failure to understand the mind-sets of other nations’ leaders, will result in worsening relations and increased conflicts. This is an important book for presidents, officials, and citizens concerned about America’s evolving role in the world.

KARL HELICHER (November/December 2017)

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