

[Transcript] The Realignment / #362 | Steven Simon: The Rise and Fall of America's Grand Delusion in the Middle East

Marsha here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

Hey everyone, welcome back to the show. Before we dive into today's episode, I just wanted to shout out our Supercast, one of the main ways we fund the show. Socrates are about to record our next exclusive Q&A, Ask Me Anything episode, early this upcoming Friday, a.k.a. tomorrow, for release later that morning. Subscribe to Supercast, can access the Ask Me Anything discussion and submit your questions because it's Thursday, you still have time to do so. If you'd like to subscribe and add your own questions or check out what other people have submitted, go to realignment.supercast.com onto today's episode. My guest today is Stephen Simon, author of the recently released *Grand Illusion, The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*. After all of our coverage of the Iraq War, Afghanistan, and the broad dissatisfaction with the past 20 years of the war on terror in terms of the United States, I wanted to do something a little more forward facing rather than just looking at the past, focused on what the Middle East actually means to the US in 2023, whether we've truly moved on, a.k.a. is there a possibility that this is like the 1990s where we think it's over after the desert storm, but 10 years later as November 11th happens. And what the broader lessons for US foreign policy are as attention shifts to the Asia Pacific and Eastern Europe as we face great power rivalry with China and Russia. Stephen is the perfect guest to cover this topic with. He was on the National Security Council staff as Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs during the Obama administration. He worked on the NSC staff from 1994 to 1999 on counterterrorism in the Middle East during the Clinton administration and had a 15-year career in the State Department prior to that. Lots of great things here. Love to hear what you think. Send us an email or of course leave a question about anything we discussed on the Supercast website. Hope you all enjoyed the conversation and a huge thank you to Lincoln Network for supporting us.

Stephen Simon, welcome to the realignment. Well, thank you for having me on your program. Yes, it's really great to speak with you. So I usually hate when a guest does the whole talks to their bio, their life story. It's not superficial, but unhelpful as a listener when they can look that up on a book jacket. But because the story we're discussing on this podcast is so tied to your actual career in U.S. foreign policy, I would love for you just to go over your actual bio, your resume, the role in which you played in this 40-plus-year history in the U.S. and the Middle East. Sure, Marshall. Thank you. I'll do that. But briefly, I came into government as a kind of second or third career, I guess, in the first term of the Reagan administration and I served at the State Department through the First Gulf War, where I was working on diplomatic support for military operations associated with that war. And then I had a brief period of academic leave working on mostly Arabic language things at Oxford and then came back to Washington and served then in the Clinton White House for six years or so as counterterrorism advisor and working on some sort of specialized Middle East security issues. After that, I was assigned to London and part of my time there was spent on a detail to a think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies wrote a book there with a colleague called *Age of Sacred Terror*, which was about that you had leading up to 9-11 and the U.S. response. That book was well received. I left government at that point after my assignment in London and worked for various think tanks and did some teaching at Princeton and other places and

then worked out in the Persian Gulf for a while as a consultant to the Court of the Crown Prince and United Arab Emirates on security issues principally and then returned to government in the Obama administration where I worked in his first term as the senior director on the NSC for Middle East and North Africa and then I retired really a second time at the end of the Obama administration and went straight into academics where I've been ever since I'm at MIT now. So I want this to be a forward-facing episode that integrates the history that you're describing in Grand Illusion. Do you think, what would you say the Middle East means to the United States today in the year 2023? Most people I think, even in policy circles, have kind of moved on. What is the significance of the region today?

Well, that's a mighty big question, but it is the central one, I think.

The Middle East is of diminishing importance to U.S. interests at this point. The U.S. had met its objectives really in the Middle East at the end of the Cold War, quite a long time ago, once the existence and prosperity really of Israel was secured and a steady flow of oil from Saudi Arabia was likewise secured. In a way, our interests have been diminishing ever since. The exception to that, of course, was our entanglement in Iraq, which is now really coming to a close. I spent a lot of time in Iraq last year, our relations, the U.S. relations with Iraq are normalizing at this point. They're not really militarized. They're mostly economic.

There's a bit of concern about the security situation, but ISIS at this stage is more of a nuisance than anything else. Our two principal concerns at this stage, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are so secure that they feel quite comfortable diversifying their diplomatic portfolios and dissing the United States when they feel that it's in their interest to do so. That's something that would not have happened before. I think it reflects on the one hand, in a way, the success of U.S. policy and on the other, the maturation of these states. In the meantime, they're not threatened. Saudi Arabia has no natural predators and Israel is pretty secure as well. It's got nuclear weapons, a large army, a defense industrial base, hypercapita GDP.

They're doing pretty well. At the same time, the United States is moving on to other theaters, particularly the Western Pacific and, of course, Europe and NATO in the context of the Ukraine, Russia war. I see the Middle East as being of continually diminishing interest. As Donald Trump said in 2019 when Iran attacked Saudi Arabia, we do not need their oil is what he said. Of course, he was correct. I don't think that the U.S. is entangled or will be entangled in anything like the way it has been during this 40-year arc of intervention between the Reagan administration first term and the end of the Obama administration. I think the one, two wrinkles in the story you just told. One, couldn't one argue that the quote unquote natural predator to use your metaphor in the context of Israel and Saudi Arabia, wouldn't that be Iran in terms of how they're positioning themselves regionally? I think Iran is a problem potentially for both Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it's not an existential threat. Now, of course, if Iran had nuclear weapons, it could, by definition, be an existential threat to any country to which it could deliver a warhead.

But it doesn't have a nuclear weapon, although it could have one. I assume fairly quickly if they decided to go for it, because the agreement that the United States, the EU, China, and Russia had with Iran to halt its nuclear weapons program until, well, 2031 was ripped up by Donald Trump. So there's a bit more exposure for Israel at this stage. But the Israelis didn't favor that agreement. What can you do really? But it's hard to see scenarios in which the Iranians seriously threatened Saudi Arabia for one thing. And in fact, the Saudis are now engaged in

intensive talks and have been really for the past year, at least, with Iran that are hosted by the Iraqis in Baghdad. And the Israelis seem pretty secure in their approach to Iran right now. Their talking points nowadays are that, well, yes, Iran is enriching at 60%. And that's a consequence of there being no agreement to limit their enrichment. But they don't see in the cards right now an Iranian decision to produce a weapon. And when you talk to Israelis about their military

options, they generally say, well, right now they don't have a really good military option for reasons that we could explore, if you wish. But they think that within two years they'll have a workable military approach to stanching Iran's nuclear program if Iran goes beyond 60%. The Iranians, of course, have enriched to 84.7% in minute quantities. But the Israelis sort of brushed that off, interestingly. So two questions then. So one, to understand the enrichment part of the conversation, does one need to enrich to 100% to have the capacity to go nuclear? Is that how I should understand it? 90% more or less. 90% enrichment is regarded as weapons

grade uranium. So you have U-235 in a sufficient quantity, 10 to 15 kilograms, something like that, depending on the level of the enrichment of the fuel that you're using. You can create a so-called physics package, which is the term of art for an explosive device that you would put in a warhead and detonate somewhere. So it's generally thought that once you're 60% or above, then the challenge of getting to a weapons grade level fuel is quite modest. There's not much of an issue. So in consequence, many people regard Iran now as a so-called threshold state, which is to say that they can create a weapon so quickly at this stage that you might as well think of them as a nuclear weapons state.

So then speak to your point about the Israelis not believing they have any viable options over the next two years. How can you expand on that? There are a range of targets that the Israelis would have to strike or believe they would have to strike in order to disable the program in a way that would be difficult to reconstitute quickly. No one disputes the fact that the Iranians could reconstitute a program that had been attacked at some point, but the question is how fast could they do it? So the more intensive your attack, the bigger its scope, the less likely it is that the Iranians will be able to reconstitute very quickly. In order to carry out strikes like that, the Israelis would have to use virtually their whole air force at this point and possibly have to put people in on the ground to attack certain buried targets. That would be difficult for the Israelis given their current military capacity to destroy. This is a huge effort for a relatively small country like Israel. They could pull it off, but they couldn't keep it going, which is something the United States, for example, could do, which is one of the reasons the Israelis are so eager for the United States either to join them or to take the initiative and attack Iran because our military capacity and the weapons that we have and so forth are quite impressive and could do some serious damage to the Iranian program that would take a while to repair. I don't know what the Israelis are working on right now, but they seem to think that within a couple of years they'll have, I think, weapons that will enable them to penetrate deeply buried Iranian nuclear facilities, and that's, I think, key from an Israeli perspective.

As you look at the American political scene today, do you see any appetite on either side of the aisle to embrace joining in, leading any sort of anti-Iranian nuclear program strikes?

No, I don't. I need to think about that for a second.

No, I haven't detected any great enthusiasm for that. Most of the attention directed at Iran, recently, particularly on Capitol Hill, has been generated by the harsh and violent response of the Iranian government to hijab protesters, and that's attracted a lot of serious criticism on the Hill. What people are calling Iranian regional malign activities, which is to say Iranian support for Houthi rebels in Yemen, Iranian support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and Iranian encroachment within Iraq, particularly in the form of its support for militias in Iraq that are technically part of the Iraqi military force structure, but in many respects are independent, and some of them take guidance from Iran. That seems to be the bigger concern in Washington now, not so much the nuclear issue. I'd love to zoom out and focus on the broad narrative arc of the book and ask a really cheap question as an interviewer. What was the Grand Illusion, and to what degree do you see that Grand Illusion applying to other regions, let's say like the Pacific moving forward, let's say to post-Ukraine war Europe? Is this a story where there's a general reality of the Middle East for the past 40 years, or is there a broader concern about inclinations within the broader US foreign policy approach? The delusions as they applied to the Middle East were essentially that the United States could remake the Middle East in its own image, and that doing so would have positive consequences globally. That's the one delusion. The second delusion is that the United States actually had the power to accomplish that, and those two delusions were a sort of piggybacking on perennial problems, and that that like the first two delusions actually afflicted governments in the United States of both parties. This is a kind of a non-partisan issue, and those two other issues were one, domestic politics, and second, the perennial concern over reputation and credibility, and perceptions of America as exhibiting serious resolve. That preoccupation stemmed from concern from maintaining deterrence. The way you keep people from attacking you is by beating your chest and looking tough and doing what you need to sustain that impression. When you combined all these things, you wound up with really powerful impulse to intervention in the Middle East. Because the United States lacked the power to accomplish what it sought to do in the Middle East, its credibility needed to suffer. It really wasn't until, I would say, the tail end of Obama's first term that the fever broke. In other words, this sort of cluster of delusions and misperceptions really kicked in hard in Reagan's first term, and it peaked with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and then it began its decline as the consequences of that intervention and its massive costs, not just to the United States, but also to Iraq itself, became evident. Now, you can hear echoes of this, and I think you're you're right, Marshall. I mean, you could see echoes of it with respect to China, but more emphatically, I think, in talking about, in the U.S. government discourse about Russia and Ukraine and freedom versus authoritarianism and so forth, the difference, I think, is that, and here, I'm just going out on a limb. I mean...

No, please, that's the format.

Okay. Well, greetings from the limb. I think that there is some underlying factual or objective concerns that the United States has about Russia and China that simply didn't exist with respect to the Middle East for quite a long time during which the United States was actively engaged there. So that's, to my mind, there's a bit of a difference between the applications

of this rhetoric to China and Russia on the one hand and the Middle East as it was applied by previous administrations. So that's my... On the limb, off the cuff reply.

Yeah, no, so many things I want to pick up there. So number one, it seems to me, in no particular order, to your point about the autocracy versus democracy, freedom, those different dynamics, it seems to me that aside from various either statements or misstatements by President Biden, the difference between 2022 and 2002 is that in 2002, the Bush administration is in many ways taking its rhetoric around an axis of evil, a rhetoric around deterrence, to its logical conclusion within their framework in the sense of, okay, if there's this axis of evil, which includes Iraq, well, we're going to pursue a policy of regime change when it comes to conversations about autocracy and democracy in China, in Russia, besides those statements, I don't think there's any fair assumption at all that the Biden administration is seriously debating. Okay, how do we overthrow the CCP? How do we actually directly overthrow the Putin regime? Because I think in this key case, there is a real, I think, just takeaway from that rhetoric in 2002 in terms of what the US can actually do. You could debate the degree to which are Ukraine policy or China policy is correct, but it seems as if we really are in this post forever war, post Middle Eastern war, reduction in scope. Would you agree with that characterization

or would you poke any holes in that? I think it's largely correct. I mean, I think there's a more realistic assessment of the limits of US power and of the strength of its adversaries. Compared to 2002, the structure of the global order is just quite different to what it was then. You can see more than just glimpses of multipolarity in global order now, which is in itself a constraint on the freedom of US action. At this point as well, the United States is dealing with adversaries in Asia and Europe that are nuclear armed. That in itself imposes limits, as it did in the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union, on the degree to which they could risk direct conflict and therefore fought primarily through proxies.

The strategic environment for the United States now with respect to these two major power adversaries is completely different to what it was in the Middle East. The irony here, if that's the right word, is that even in dealing with the Middle East, the United States didn't have the power to accomplish its goals. Some of the policies that it pursued, especially say under Clinton of dual containment, which the doctrine of dual containment as it was developed by the Clinton administration, was that the United States didn't have to rely on Iraq and Iran to balance against one another and essentially neutralize their trouble-making capacities for everyone else in the region. Rather, the United States could take on the role of containing both Iran and Iraq. It turned out the United States really didn't have the power to do that. At the end of the day, that policy led to a comparatively strong Iran and comparatively weak Iraq, which turned out not to be such a good outcome for the United States strategically. Here's what I'm curious about. What did then the United States have the power to

circa, let's say, October 2001 to roughly December 2002, in the sense that overthrowing the Taliban, chasing bin Laden into Pakistan, that was completely within the United States' power, remaking Iraq. You cover this in the history, obviously, but there were a variety of debates you could have had. Even after the invasion of Iraq, there could have been a variety of different paths. You could have invaded, overthrown Saddam in the quick period that he was overthrown,

and then washed your hands of it, thrown it to the UN, did the weird 2006 Joe Biden option and split Iraq into three different countries. You could have done that. I guess what I'm really asking you is where actually was the... I'm not saying any of those moves were inherently the right decisions, but those actually were within American power. It seems to me that you're really drawing the line at treating post-2003 Iraq as equivalent to Germany and Japan after World War II, this country which we were hostile towards, that we could see 50, 60 years later a completely reoriented relationship between the countries. How would you think about this?

Well, here's what I think about that. I think you're right in a number of respects.

The first is that nothing is for ordained or inevitable, and there were alternative courses of action in the wake of 9-11. At its most basic, no one really believes that if Al Gore had been elected president, and some would say he was elected president, but if Al Gore had been in office in September 2001, the United States would not have included Iraq on its list of target countries. Now, for Bush, it was a natural target for a number of reasons that I think are broadly understood, but in this respect too, I mean, you're right, the plan didn't have to include the democratization of Iraq, the attempt to rebuild the state under some new kind of alternative political arrangement. It could have just gone in, killed the king, and pulled out.

Hearing you say that though, it's interesting. Once again, I was in fifth grade at the time, so my opinion literally does not matter, but fifth grade Marshall was opposed to the poor in Iraq from what I could glean from the PBS news hour, but I think my kind of pushback to that dynamic was that I don't think there was an alternative. This is the coal and tile, you break it, you buy it framework. Once given those domestic political pressures that you were discussing earlier, I don't see a world where the United States could have just said, okay, you know, it's July 2003, an insurgency started up, you have interethnic and religious conflict really tapping up, we're just going to leave, and then watch that then proceed poorly over the next two years. I think if you want to, and once again, regardless of your opinion on the Biden administration's withdrawal from Kabul and Afghanistan, the fact that it went poorly domestically impacted the presidency. So Bush, part of the reason why Bush, I think, was always going to stay and democratize is that in a democracy, I don't, once you broke it, I don't see what the political alternative was, and you were there. So maybe you'd think about it differently. Do I think about it differently? Let me, I'm not really sure that I do, but I would frame it a little bit differently. So there's the question of why did Bush choose to do what he did, and the question, were there reasonable alternatives? And I think it's on the, it's on the second point that you and I might differ a little bit. But to the first point, you know, it's interesting when you, when you look at the, at the planning and the campaign histories of the 2003 war and the preparation for it and so forth, they, this, the Bush administration was thinking in terms of something that you raised before, which was the occupation of Germany by the United States following its victory in the European theater in 1945.

And they sought certain parallels. So just as the American occupation government, well, the Allied occupation government in Germany in 45 instituted a policy of denazification, which, you know, was pursued up to a point. So the occupation government in Iraq pursued a policy of debathification, the bath being the party to which, you know, Saddam belonged in which he led. Now, that was a very self-conscious parallel to what was going on in the attempt to form a new Iraqi government under a new system and install it in 2005. That was also,

you know, very, very much a parallel to what the United States and some of the, you know, allies sought to do in Berlin, in, in Bonn in, in 1940, 45. So they, they saw themselves as inheritors of, of a powerful legacy, in a sense, a kind of derived greatest generation. And Iraq was, was their Germany. And, you know, on the, on the face of it, I mean, it seems absurd. But, but anyway, they seem really to have believed that, you know, pretty strongly now as to alternatives. I guess this is where I, I suppose I disagree with you, because I think, you know, it was an alternative if the United States chose to do this, because to go into Baghdad, bump off Saddam and find a compliant general, you know, Sunni general, to take over in, in Saddam's place, pledging to, you know, abjure WMD until the end of time and, and, and so forth. But, but, you know, that approach, which I do think was possible, would have conflicted with this, you know, basic impulse that I described a second ago of, you know, wanting to rebuild Iraq and America's image and, and, and, and so forth. So, you know, the big problems with the occupation were the fact that it was entrusted to, you know, inexperienced political appointees by the administration and, and, and didn't use any of the vast planning output that the, the intelligence community and the State Department and even some parts of the Pentagon had put together, you know, to regulate the occupation of Iraq and produce some kind of stable outcome. And instead, you know, the, the really experienced people who were the first in, like General Jay Garner and his, and his State Department associates who were quite experienced, they were, they were removed fairly quickly and replaced by, you know, L. Paul Bremer, Jerry Bremer, as, as, as head of things. And then, you know, Bremer came in and, as is famously known, you know, wrote to his, to his staff that he thought his arrival should be marked by a series of dramatic moves, one of which was to disband the Iraqi army, thus dispersing, you know, hordes of young men with military experience, but unemployed throughout Iraq. And the second was this debathification. And both turned out to be destabilizing for Iraq and contributed to a civil war that tore the country apart, killed a lot of Americans and certainly killed a very large number of Iraqis. So there you go. Something you do at a career level is you, you, you teach, you're, you're engaging with young people. And as I'm thinking, I'm 31, so I'm gradually leaving the quote unquote young person category. But something I like to think about when I'm discussing this issue is, is I think the fascinating fact that George W. Bush, in the voice of Condi Rice before he became president in 2001, is writing these foreign affairs articles, literally saying, in the 90s, we were two interventionists, we were too driven by these clintonian humanitarian intervention policies. And instead, we're going to have an American foreign policy that is driven by our interests. They're always like realists and not interventionists who attack the Bush administration. And I say, if you go back and read that, read that piece in 2000, you'll be nodding along in terms of that basic critique. So what I'm kind of getting at there with this question is the Bush administration its preconceived notions of how US foreign policy should operate, did not survive first contact with the enemy slash history slash actual events. So if September 11th happens, the pre-September 10 playbook is thrown out the window. How would you advise future leaders, future administrations, anyone of interest who's listening, to not just be completely hobbled by events to just throw out their preconceived notions and just go in the complete opposite direction? Because that's kind

of like my takeaway of reading that part of the history, which was, A, either the non-interventionism wasn't actually deeply rooted and was more just superficial responding to 1990s dynamics. And it wasn't actually a sustainable foundational structure for policy that got undergirded administration where events are going to happen. So how would you respond to this?

Yeah, I was on a panel, I think it was at Aspen before the invasion of Iraq, where one of the other participants was a former secretary of state with a pretty distinguished reputation and deservedly. And the question came up for the panel, well, should we invade Iraq? And I said, no, I didn't think that was a good idea, can of worms, it's a non sequitur to the 9-11 attacks, let's not do that. And this former secretary of state got very agitated by that response. And he asked me, well, then who should we invade? When taken out of context, it sounds kind of funny, sort of a bit strange. But I think what he meant was after the 9-11 attacks, it was absolutely essential that the United States wage war against someone. The United States needed to display kind of a robust resolve and determination to subdue enemies and a willingness to use force on a grand scale and in a way that demonstrated the real potential of American military power.

And quick interruption, because it seems to me, because I think most folks obviously weren't paying attention to this history, a post 9-11 critique that you could have offered at the Clinton administration, I don't know the degree to which this is true, so I'd like to hear your thoughts on it, would be, look, you have the first World Trade Center bombing, you have a variety of incidents from the USS Cole bombing to the bombings in Nairobi and Kenya, and essentially it was treated either as let's toss some Patriot missiles at a factory in Sudan that doesn't really matter, or we'll treat this as a law enforcement issue, so the FBI is going to handle it. So it seems to me some of that, like we should invade energy was we need to treat this like the threat that it actually is and go in that direction. That seems to me, as I read the history, sort of the tonal shift when it came to the approach. Is that an accurate reading or is that just not really present at the time when you're thinking about this? The thing about the period before 9-11 is that it was before 9-11. A good answer, which is true. It was difficult under the circumstances to mobilize the government, but at least that was my perspective from the White House at that point. There was a lethal finding. That is to say, a document authorizing the capture or killing of who some have been Latin. In the United States, in that period, explored a number of ways to carry that out, but it never really could do so. My recollection is because to do so required cooperation from Pakistan. As the fact that who some have been Latin eventually settled peacefully and happily in Pakistan for many years demonstrated that the United States couldn't rely on Pakistani cooperation. Otherwise, the US had no basis from which to operate and carry out an operation on the ground that would kill Bin Laden. Also, before 9-11,

because it was before 9-11, there was a concern about collateral damage that disappeared after 9-11. The United States would plan raids on Bin Laden facilities or al-Qaeda camps where he was believed to be staying for short periods. Everybody would get geared up and then it would turn out that where he was believed to be staying was very close to a school or very close to a mosque. We would look at the range arcs and the radii in which lethality was pretty much guaranteed by the munition that would be used. We said, well, now we can't risk killing children to kill Bin Laden. Now, of course, after 9-11, killing children, well, that's not a problem. We're

going to go after the bad guys no matter what it takes because the 9-11 attacks were just so shocking.

They were really deranging. I understood then and I understand in retrospect why that was the case. But to your underlying point, yes, it would have been great if the United States could have just nipped this in the bud in the 1990s or any point before 2001. But in the pre-9-11 environment, nobody was really all that interested in going the distance and taking the risks with bilateral relations with Pakistan, say, or the risk of collateral damage.

So there we were. But Al Qaeda had been planning the 9-11 thing for a while or it looks as though they were. I don't think that there's enough known really about the conspiracy, at least publicly, because none of the participants ever went to trial and these kinds of things generally emerge for the public in that interjudicial context. I don't know if that answered your question.

No, it does. Because once again, I think the something I just try to get at when I discuss this episode is the audience hates when I do this, but I really don't like focusing the conversation on Bush lied, people died like this, this or that, because to a certain degree, it removes the timelessness of the issues that are raised by the history you're telling here, which is an event happens. Your instinct is to throw out everything you preconceived before and go on to the other extreme. This is early American Cold War history. This is who lost China. This is X, X, Y, and Z. And as we're thinking about this post forever war, great power, conflict dynamic, I think it's really important to think to what degree is there a timeless dilemma that anyone in any sort of foreign policy decision making capacity is going to have to confront. So another dynamic that I'd like to talk about in these last few minutes, I started the episode by saying, oh, I feel like America is just moving on from the Middle East to counter myself my default understanding of post Cold War history is that as soon as you quit, you're almost certainly pulled back. So if it's 2001 before 9 11, we're talking about Hainan Island. And the Chinese were talking about Taiwan, you know, Bill Clinton sending carrier groups to the Taiwan Strait. We just move on from that. And then 15 years later, everything's great power competition. 2011, we leave Iraq, quote unquote, 2013, we're back fully there fighting ISIS. So as much as I want to say, okay, we've earned our lesson, we're moving on. I think that policy minded people who are listening should be fully prepared for a possibility of a world war guess what's 2032, and X, Y, and Z thing has happened. And we're back in the Middle East. To what degree am I just sort of over narrativizing history, which isn't moving in any one direction isn't inevitable in any one thing? How would you think about that? Because I just don't I just feel as if we're going to be back in some respect. That's just like my visceral reaction.

Yeah. So, well, first of all, I don't think your reaction is misplaced, you know, or, or, or sort of unwise in any way. There's always the possibility of going back. And that's, you know, in some respects, that that's how I end the book. It's like, well, you know, we could wind up going back. And I, and, and there are two pathways, you know, to a return, a military return of the United States, the Middle East. I mean, a military intervention, not a military return, because we're still there militarily, you know, particularly in the Gulf. And maybe I don't see that changing anytime soon. But the first would be a conflict with, with Iran. And the risk of such a conflict is, is I think, pretty high, at least right now. And, you know, which is one of the reasons why everyone is on pins and needles about the direction that Iran, you know, chooses to go. And one of the first things I, you know, I asked when the news

of the Chinese brokered Iranian Saudi Concordat, you know, was, was announced was, well, did the Chinese get any commitments from the Iranians to hold enrichment at a level well below weapons grade? I mean, that would have been a significant, you know, outcome of, of, of, of this agreement. But anyway, that's unknown. I mean, perhaps they did elicit such an agreement. Maybe they didn't. I don't know. But the, but the fact that the Iranians, you know, are in their current posture, the Israelis are very nervous. And they're looking for ways in which they can deal with this problem keeps the pathway to renewed war with Iran open. And, and if the United States gets involved in that, in a campaign, you know, to destroy the Iranian nuclear program, I mean, it's going to be a coordinate sustained series of airstrikes that's going to go on for a while. I mean, the United States will be at war with the Islamic Republic. I mean, when that, you know, when that happens. So that's, that's a danger. The other, which I think. So it's not, it's not, it's not Top Gun Maverick. There's no one. I don't know if you saw the Top Gun sequel, but obviously the country they're striking is obviously a kind of sci-fi version of Iran. And it seems like it's handled in one daring airstrike. Well, you know, it sort of depends what the Iranians do, because if the Iranians choose to retaliate, which they might, you know, after U.S. attacks, then the U.S. will respond to that retaliation. And then, you know, the, the, the conflict just spirals and it turns into something bigger than it was meant to be, you know, at the outset, when the U.S. will undoubtedly have said, well, we are just enforcing the will of the international community with respect to this nuclear program. That's all we want to do. No regime change, nothing else, but, you know, the thing will escalate. And there's the, you know, the ISIS, you know, threat, but I think, you know, we're, we're sort of covered by the assistance that we're giving to the Iraqi military and by keeping, you know, a small number of troops in, in eastern Syria, where, you know, ISIS, you know, really, you know, that's where they are. So, you know, but that's, but that's a lesser threat. I think that that, I think the main pathway to the return of the United States in an interventionist mode, a military interventionist mode in the Middle East is going to be Iran, which is why anyway, it's really important to resolve this nuclear thing one way or another at, well, not one way or another. I was about to say, like, you just outlined a very specific means of handling that situation. So here's the closing question. Warnings about not just saying, okay, we're done with that, we're washing our hands, we're never going back to the Middle East to side. The next, generally, defining, I don't want to say conflict because that assumes inevitability, but at least theater of potential operations, theater of crisis theory, theater of where events are going to transpire is clearly in this like broader Eurasian context of, you know, Eastern Europe and China. What would just be considering your career, considering your history? What would your advice be for folks who are in your place when you started in the Middle East? So 40 years ago, you're entering the space, you're entering government. What would be your advice for anyone who's entering the policy space during a period that's going to be defined by this Sino-Russian American theater of potential conflict? Yeah. So Obama's, you know, dictum as was boldfaced, don't do stupid stuff. I mean, to me, that's in the ranks of, I think therefore I am. I mean, it's a profound thing. So that would be, you know, I would reiterate that. And then there would be, you know, stick to your knitting, which is to say, focus on core U.S. interests. What's really a threat or very likely to emerge

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as a serious threat to core U.S. interests and don't overreact. And don't relate discreet problems that we face with other countries to grand theories of, you know, clashes of civilizations, of freedom versus authoritarianism, or strategic competition at sort of a global level. You have a problem, a discreet problem, you resolve it discreetly and you avoid linking it to major issues that soon, you know, evolved into questions of war and peace. That's really it. That is an excellent place to end. Stephen Simon, thank you for joining me on The Realignment. The book is Grand Illusion, The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East. You can find it wherever you purchase your books, especially our bookshop. Thank you for joining me on The Realignment. Thanks very much, Marshall. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for a lifetime membership raise. See you all next time.