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Books of The Times:
When a Leader Missteps, a World Can Go Astray
By Michiko Kakutani

Second Chance
Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower
By Zbigniew Brzezinski

234 pages. Basic Books. \$26.95.

In the months before the American invasion of Iraq, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, was one of the few members of the foreign policy establishment (along with Brent Scowcroft, former national security adviser to President George H. W. Bush) to speak out strongly about the dangers of going to war unilaterally against Saddam Hussein, and to warn, presciently it turns out, of the possibly dire consequences of doing so without a larger strategic plan.

In August 2002, as the current Bush administration was already hurrying toward an invasion, Mr. Brzezinski cautioned that war “is too serious a business and too unpredictable in its dynamic consequences - especially in a highly flammable region - to be undertaken because of a personal peeve, demagogically articulated fears or vague factual assertions.” In February 2003, just weeks before the invasion, he added that “an America that decides to act essentially on its own regarding Iraq” could “find itself quite alone in having to cope with the costs and burdens of the war’s aftermath, not to mention widespread and rising hostility abroad.”

In his compelling new book, “Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower,” Mr. Brzezinski not only assesses the short- and long-term fallout of the Iraq war, but also puts that grim situation in perspective with the tumultuous global changes that have taken place in the last two decades. He dispassionately analyzes American foreign policy as conducted by the last three presidents - George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George H. W. Bush - and he gives the reader a sobering analysis of where these leaders’ cumulative decisions have left the United States as it now searches for an exit strategy from Iraq, faces potentially explosive situations in Iran and North Korea and copes with an increasingly alienated Europe and an increasingly assertive China.

Mr. Brzezinski’s verdict on the current president’s record - “catastrophic,” he calls it - is nothing short of devastating. And his overall assessment of America’s current plight is worrying as well: “Though in some dimensions, such as the military, American power may be greater in 2006 than in 1991, the country’s

capacity to mobilize, inspire, point in a shared direction and thus shape global realities has significantly declined. Fifteen years after its coronation as global leader, America is becoming a fearful and lonely democracy in a politically antagonistic world.”

“Second Chance” is, in some respects, a continuation of the author’s earlier books “The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership” (2004) and “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives” (1997), which examined the responsibilities and perils of global leadership facing America as the one superpower in a post-cold-war world. As in those books, Mr. Brzezinski employs a brisk, no-nonsense style here, using his erudition in history and foreign policy to lay out his views succinctly. A confirmed realist (a school of thinking willfully dismissed by the idealists and ideological hawks in the current Bush administration), the author writes with a keen understanding of the ways in which military or political actions in one part of the world can affect developments in another region, as well as a shrewd appreciation of the fallout of a global zeitgeist that is increasingly anti-imperialist, anti-Western and anti-American.

What this book does most strikingly is remind the reader just how drastically things have changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. At that point, Mr. Brzezinski writes, America was “globally admired” and “faced no peer, no rival, no threat, neither on the Western front nor the Eastern front, nor on the Southern fronts of the great cold war that had been waged for several decades on the massive Eurasian chessboard.”

A mere decade and a half later, he argues, the United States is “widely viewed around the world with intense hostility,” its “credibility in tatters,” its military bogged down in the Middle East, “its formerly devoted allies distancing themselves.”

Although Mr. Brzezinski holds the current president, George W. Bush, most responsible for undermining the United States’ “geopolitical position” and for misunderstanding “the historical moment,” he also points to misjudgments and missed opportunities on the part of his two predecessors in office.

Mr. Brzezinski gives the first President Bush high marks for handling “the collapse of the Soviet Union with aplomb” and mounting an international response to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait “with impressive diplomatic skill and military resolve,” but says he failed to “translate either triumph into an enduring historic success.”

The senior Mr. Bush, Mr. Brzezinski says, neither used “America’s unique political influence and moral legitimacy” to help transform Russia into a genuine democracy, nor used the victory in the first gulf war strategically to press for an Israeli-Palestinian accord and help transform the Middle East.

In the dozen years that followed, the author goes on, perception of the United States' role in the Middle East steadily deteriorated, as America "came to be perceived in the region, rightly or wrongly, not only as wearing the British imperialist mantle but as acting increasingly on behalf of Israel, professing peace but engaging in delaying tactics that facilitated the expansion of the settlements."

In Mr. Brzezinski's opinion, Bill Clinton deserves credit for setting forth parameters for a Middle East peace settlement at Camp David II, for expanding and consolidating the Atlantic alliance and for helping to stabilize the Balkans. But in the end, he contends that Mr. Clinton's "casual and politically opportunistic style of decision-making was not conducive to strategic clarity, and his faith in the historical determinism of globalization made such a strategy seem unnecessary."

By 1995, Mr. Brzezinski goes on, America's "global status was probably at its peak," but a "multiplicity of complex" situations that had surfaced in the wake of the cold war's end had metastasized: "As a result, the global totem-pole atop which Clinton stood tall rested on shaky ground."

Though the terrorist attacks of 9/11 wrought a moment of "global solidarity with America," Mr. Brzezinski writes, the Bush administration's swaggering unilateralism and "neocon Manicheanism" would turn a moment of opportunity into "a self-inflicted and festering wound while precipitating rising global hostility toward America." Indeed, he argues that the Iraq war "has caused calamitous damage to America's global standing," demonstrating that the United States "was able neither to rally the world to its cause nor to decisively prevail by use of arms."

Further, he says, "the war in Iraq has been a geopolitical disaster," diverting resources and attention from the terrorist threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan, even as it's increased "the terrorist threat to the United States" by fomenting resentment toward America and providing "fertile soil for new recruits to terrorism."

This precarious situation, Mr. Brzezinski says, means that "it will take years of deliberate effort and genuine skill to restore America's political credibility and legitimacy," placing enormous importance on the diplomatic and strategic skills of the next president "to fashion a truly post-cold-war globalist foreign policy."

"Nothing could be worse for America, and eventually the world," he writes at the end of this unsparing volume, "than if American policy were universally viewed as arrogantly imperial in a postimperial age, mired in a colonial relapse in a postcolonial time, selfishly indifferent in the face of unprecedented global interdependence, and culturally self-righteous in a religiously diverse world. The crisis of American superpower would then become terminal."