

Days of Decision: Turning Points in U.S. Foreign Policy

By Micheal Nojeim and David Kilroy

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DECISION
*Turning Points in
U.S. Foreign Policy*

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Readers who enjoyed America's First Battles as junior officers will find value and a tinge of nostalgia in a recent book by Micheal Nojeim and David Kilroy. Their book, *Days of Decision*, is an interesting compilation of key turning points in US foreign policy and a refreshing contribution to the literature on US foreign policy and security studies. The book covers twelve turning points in US foreign policy, from the sinking of the Maine to the 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks.

The thesis of the book is that, over the last century, sudden crises or major policy initiatives have significantly altered the direction of foreign policy. While this is not a startling revelation, the authors extrapolate four hypotheses from this position. First, they make the point that political and historical context matter. Nojeim and Kilroy do a nice job of setting the political, historical, and strategic context in each of the case studies examined. Second, they suggest that foreign policy is usually left to the elites until a crisis brings US foreign policy into the domestic spotlight. For example, the Arab-Israeli War and subsequent oil embargo in 1973 turned America's attention to the Middle East, where it has been fixated ever since. Until that crisis, the public was generally ambivalent about the region. Third, while elections are primarily determined by domestic issues, a president's historic legacy is most often determined by foreign policy triumphs or failures. (The most glaring exception in the book was the 1968 election, in which the Tet Offensive and civil unrest in the United States doomed Johnson's prospects for re-election.) Finally, the authors present the argument that foreign policy debates among top ranking governmental officials are an integral component of major policy shifts, thus dispelling the rationalist notion that states are monolithic entities that act on well-defined power interests. In fact, these debates demonstrate that interests and policy are often contested. These four hypotheses are addressed in each of the case studies examined in the book (the sinking of the Maine, the Lusitania crisis, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Korean War, the Sputnik crisis, the Cuban missile crisis, the Tet Offensive, the United States opening to China, the Arab-Israeli War, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the attacks of 11 September 2001). The case studies were selected because they sparked considerable debate within the government, brought foreign policy into the national spotlight, and led to a significant change in the direction of US foreign policy.

Perhaps the most relevant case study for contemporary strategists deals with the opening of relations with China. The authors provide a nice summary of the historic tensions between the United States and China. The authors also make the point that President Nixon's previous anticommunist stance gave him the domestic credibility to pursue closer relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Through a series of well-timed signals and progressive concessions, President Nixon and his administration were able to mend fences with a seemingly implacable

foe, dramatically changing the global strategic environment and establishing the foundation for future cooperation ultimately facilitating our close (albeit wary) economic relationship with China today. While there was no definitive crisis bringing this change in foreign policy about, Nixon was able to move his new China policy into the domestic spotlight, first through an unlikely interaction with China (ping-pong) and then through Nixon's high visibility, election year visit to China. This was a key achievement in the president's tarnished legacy.

For policymakers and strategists looking for an alternative to the ongoing containment of Iran, the China case holds some hopeful parallels. The crisis in Syria and growing isolation of Iran due to its nuclear activities might provide a permissive environment for both the United States and Iran to reassess their current policies. The American public is focused on continuing domestic economic issues and weary of tremendous expenditures of blood and treasury in both Afghanistan and Iraq. This environment echoes the public mood of exhaustion and mistrust of the government in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. The US withdrawal from Iraq, and pending departure from Afghanistan, might also ease Iranian suspicions and provide them with some domestic political space for compromise. Reaching a strategic accommodation with Iran would enable the United States to conserve scarce military and economic resources and invest them more productively in Asia, just as the breakthrough with China in the aftermath of Vietnam allowed the United States to restore its international reputation and permitted a more intense strategic focus on the Soviet Union.

While insightful and well-written, the individual hypotheses are not particularly new to the study of foreign policy. For example, most practitioners understand that political and historic context matter when foreign policy is being decided. (This was a theme throughout the America's First Battles case studies as well.) It is also not a revelation that domestic politics often trumps foreign policy during election cycles, nor that foreign policy often determines a president's legacy. That said, this book is an instructive review of turning points in US foreign policy. It provides a well-reasoned framework for analyzing current crises and preparing for potential shifts in policy direction. The four hypotheses provide a logical framework for assessing our current strategic pivot towards Asia, or our response to the global financial crisis. This book is worth reading for foreign policy enthusiasts and senior political and military leaders who are struggling to develop effective policies and strategies during times of crisis.