

**GULLIVER'S TROUBLES:  
AMERICA IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

*By*  
**AARON DAVID MILLER**



**THE EIGHTH  
ANGIER BIDDLE DUKE LECTURE**

**NEW YORK CITY**

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# *Our Mission*

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist think tank dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the NCAFP identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include:

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

An important part of the activity of the NCAFP is Track I½ and Track II diplomacy. Such closed-door and off-the-record endeavors provide unique opportunities for senior U.S. and foreign officials, think tank experts, and scholars to engage in discussions designed to defuse conflict, build confidence, and resolve problems.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.



June 2014

Dear Reader,

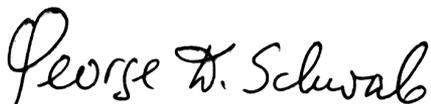
On the occasion of the eighth “Angier Biddle Duke Lecture,” I would like to take this opportunity to briefly acquaint you with the reason why we honor Angie—as he was known to us. A scion of a distinguished American family, Angie was associated with the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) almost from its inception in 1974. Shortly after its founding, he was elected president of the organization.

Notwithstanding the fact that Angie was soon called to assume the post of U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, he, until his tragic death in 1995, remained intimately involved in NCAFP affairs. For years we discussed the possibility of establishing at the NCAFP an ambassadorial lecture series. I had hoped that this would be named the “Ambassador Angier Biddle Duke Lecture Series”; he, at last, agreed and was even prepared to help raise the means for an endowment. Following his untimely death, the task fell to me. And that is the reason why we are here today to hear Dr. Aaron David Miller speak on “Gulliver’s Troubles: America in the Middle East.”

A Middle East specialist, Dr. Miller served at the Department of State as an advisor to Republican and Democratic secretaries of state, helping to formulate U.S. policy on the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Author of four books on the Middle East, Dr. Miller is currently the vice president for new initiatives and Distinguished Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Please welcome our distinguished guest.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "George W. Schwab". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

President



Thank you so much, it's an honor for me to be here today to give the Angier Biddle Duke lecture. I am vice president for new initiatives at the Wilson Center, which is a living memorial to our twenty-eighth president, our only Ph.D. president, and the only one who is buried in Washington, D.C.

I titled this talk "Gulliver's Troubles" because I think that is a fair description, not just of the current president's predicament in the Middle East, but of previous presidents too. And it will remain a predicament for Obama's successors. I am not in the "fix-it" business anymore, and I will say that quite openly. My purpose is not to make you feel good or bad. But to share some observations about this region, US policy and American interests.

I agree with H.L. Mencken. It was Mencken's view that in a democracy it is almost unfashionable to talk about the disease without talking about the cure or the problem without discussing the solution. I think that is a very wise point. Not that you aren't obligated to talk about the solutions. But unless you recognize the nature of the problem, how can you expect to resolve it? One of the things I have noticed in government, and I was a victim and proponent of it as well, was that America has this need to fix things. This notion that we must fix without first understanding the nature of what is to be fixed is a significant problem in our foreign policy. It always has been, especially in the last twenty years

Let me share a half a dozen observations about America and the Middle East.

1. Where you stand in life is driven by where you sit. This is a philosophical observation that is as true in our personal lives as it is in diplomacy. If you want to understand American foreign policy in this large and complex international system, you must understand, first and foremost, where we sit. Where we sit is virtually unparalleled in the history of great powers. We sit sandwiched between two non-predatory powers to our north and south, the Canadians and the Mexicans, and bookended between fish. We literally have fish for neighbors to our east and west. These two oceans, which one historian brilliantly described as our liquid assets, are critically important to understanding why we act the way we do in the world. It explains our idealism and why we believe that every problem has a solution. It explains our pragmatism. The notion that we believe we have the answers to these problems because we have been the "fix-it" people for a long time. That pragmatism is one of our most enduring qualities.

Where we are explains our naiveté because we no longer remember, perhaps we did at one point when we were a nation of four million, what it is like to live in a world of predators; we don't understand how small powers think.

When Secretary of State Kerry says Putin is behaving in a nineteenth-century manner in a twenty-first century world, I wonder. We have freed ourselves from the forces of history and geography based on where we are. Other countries don't have that luxury. Russia hasn't freed itself from history or geography, Iran hasn't, China hasn't, Israel hasn't, the Palestinians haven't. Where we sit, with the margin of error that we have, explains our arrogance too. When we choose, with the best of intentions, not to listen or care when we act, it is because acting abroad really doesn't present an existential threat to this country. We have a great margin for error given our geographic location and physical distance from the rest of the world.

This is critically important: great powers behave in contradictory fashion because they can afford to. Their policies are anomalous, hypocritical, and often times quite contradictory. We intervene in Libya, but not Syria, and come up with our own reasoning for doing so. We supported the Arab Spring in Egypt, but would never encourage an Arab spring in Saudi Arabia. We talked to some of the worst insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan; individuals who have blood on their hands for killing Americans, but we would never begin to think about engaging with Hezbollah or Hamas.

2. A word about politics and the national interest. I have worked for both Democrats and Republicans and voted for both Democrats and Republicans and the dividing line for America's policies in the Middle East shouldn't be between left and right, liberal and conservative, Democrats and Republicans. The dividing line is between dumb and smart.

The only question that remains is which side of the line you want America to be on: the smart side or dumb side. If you want to be on the smart side, here is what you avoid: you don't get your news from pre-validated news channels that reflect your prejudices. The notion that you can get your news from one pre-validated source is not logical. If you want America to be on the smart side, you don't demonize the opposition. In this country we now have politics that are almost tribal in nature. But just for the record, it's not the most polarizing period in America's

history. The current president confronts red and blue states, Lincoln confronted blue and gray states. Eight states seceded from the Union when Lincoln was elected—that is extreme polarization. Finally, if you want America to be on the smart side, then you practice civility in the true sense of the word. This is not just courtesy and politeness. Civility is, in essence, listening to people who you don't agree with. While she or he is presenting their respective points of view, you don't think about what you are going to say to preempt their point, you listen, on the off-chance that they say something that might be of some utility and in advancing your argument or fixing the problem.

3. If you want to understand American policy in the Middle East, the place to start is not in the Middle East, the place to start is in Washington. You have a president right now that is far more focused on the middle class than he is on the Middle East. He is one of seventeen presidents elected to a second term and the sands of his presidency are passing through his hourglass. Consolidating the gains of his first administration will be his legacy. His focus on the middle class has made him a very risk-averse president when it comes to pursuing foreign policy abroad. That risk aversion, which is mirrored and reflected in almost every poll that Pew has done recently on where Americans are with their ability to gauge in difficult enterprises, bears it out. The risk aversion is generated from two realities that have created a moment that may endure beyond this administration. A moment with legs, so to speak.

The first source is the reality that we are emerging from the two longest wars in American history: Afghanistan and Iraq. These wars are being fought by 0.5 percent of America's ~320 million people. As historian David Kennedy said, "The military is at war, but the country isn't." That has a resonance. The two longest wars in the country's history where the standard for victory was never, can we win? but, when can we leave? And, extrication is not the metric that you want to use to judge the performance and behavior of the most consequential power on Earth. We could never "win" in the conventional sense in either of these conflicts. The situation in Iraq bears that out, and, while Afghanistan is on a reduced and smaller scale, I worry about the future there. These two wars cost 6800 plus Americans dead, scores of thousands more who have received life-crippling and life-threatening injuries from which they will never recover, let alone their families. Trillions of dollars spent and America's credibility compromised, for what? You answer that question, I

cannot. What is the relationship between the investment in these two wars and the return on the investment? It is a question that dominates this administration's posture when it comes to considering the projection of military force in other conflicts and that challenge will most likely affect Obama's successor. That is strand one that is driving risk aversion.

The other strand is equally important: the nature of our own broken house. This is the most amazing country on Earth, and we have a capacity to address some of the things that ail us, but there was only one war since the start of the twentieth century that left America stronger at home and with more influence abroad, you know what war that was. I asked former president Jimmy Carter, while interviewing him for my new book, why haven't we had an undeniably great president since Franklin Roosevelt? He said "because we haven't had a good war." These two long wars has left the US weaker at home and abroad, not stronger. Indeed, our house is broken. I call them the six deadly Ds: dysfunctional politics, debt, deficit, decaying infrastructure, dependence on hydrocarbons, and a disastrous education system. These are all slow bleeds that undermine the real source of our power—our economic vitality and national resolve and cohesion as a people. In this political culture, these problems are harmful and weaken us internally, but instead of generating the kind of consensus that tames the political system, they have made it more angry and dysfunctional. If you take the two longest wars in history and marry them to the issue of our broken house, you will begin to understand why the nation, the public, and this president are skittish about squandering resources in open-ended conflicts for which there are no solutions.

4. The predicament for the United States in the Middle East, the reason I call this "Gulliver's troubles," is that we are really trapped in a conundrum. The conundrum is this: we cannot extricate ourselves from a region of the world in which we have allies and interests and enemies, but we cannot transform it either. We cannot extricate and we cannot leave. The notion that we are leaving and pivoting to Asia is simply wrong in my judgment. We are going to be in the Middle East for years to come. Out of the Middle East will come most of the seminal threats to American national interests and to our allies. These threats won't come from a resurgent Russia, a rising China, or Latin America. 9/11 didn't come from Russia, Latin America, or Asia—it came from the part of the world in which anger at the Americans is deep and the sources of anger toward our policies

and on the part of a disturbingly large minority of people who live in this region toward us specifically. That's where it came from. 9/11 was the second bloodiest day in American history, exceeded only by the one day during the battle of Antietam in which more Americans died than on any other day within the continental United States.

Here is the problem. When you cannot transform and you cannot leave, what do you do? You transact. You do business that is designed to fundamentally advance your vital national interests. You decide what is vital and separate it from what is discretionary. It is not that you don't risk, but before you do, particularly when it comes to the projection of American military power, you think very carefully. Much more carefully than we thought with respect to what ultimately happened to our policy in Afghanistan, and clearly with respect to Iraq, which, by any standard, was a war of choice, a war of discretion. The United States cannot afford to fight wars of discretion.

5. Decide what really matters to you and what doesn't. Determining what America's vital interests are in any part of the world is a tricky business. Vital means vital. You put your time, money, project American power, even when it puts Americans in harm's way. WWII was a vital American interest. 9/11 produced a need to respond and we did respond very effectively in the fall of 2001, but then it seems like things ran off the highway as U.S. ambitions and aspirations began to become enlarged. This administration has identified, for itself, four vital interests: 1) protecting the homeland; 2) getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan; 3) helping to accelerate the North American energy revolution; and 4) trying to ensure that Iran doesn't acquire nuclear capacity or a bomb itself.

We have two additional interests that I call discretionary. I call them that because the chances of actually resolving them or making them significantly less intractable are extremely remote. While the president talks about these issues and how important they are—how do we comport ourselves in the process of change in the Arab world, particularly Syria, and what do we do about the Israel-Palestine? I would argue that the president knows that his ability to fix these issues is limited.

With respect to the Arab Spring, very rarely do we witness transformative events in a region occurring as broadly and deeply as what we have seen over the last several years. It is a true transformation regardless of what results because, in the matter of a

year, the political architecture of the Arab world has changed. For fifty years, we dealt with two kinds of Arab authoritarians. The acquiescent, the ones we did business with, and there were the adversarial, the ones who were our enemies or difficult partners. All these people are gone and what is taking their place is yet to be finally determined. In such a situation, the notion that the United States could, in some way, have a significant impact on the internal or domestic development of these societies in the prospects of change was always illusory. The notion that we will have huge success exporting values and democratic principles is illusory, as is the notion that we are going to change the mind of the Egyptian military by withholding our assistance is illusory. In the past three years, Egypt has been in the hands of the two most non-democratic bodies in its history: the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand and the military on the other. Neither of these forces is interested in democracy as we understand it. This dilemma extends everywhere. The Arab world is becoming decentralized and, in addition, it is suffering from profound problems in governance, security, and prosperity. I would go so far as to argue that the three most consequential powers in the Middle East right now are the three non-Arab countries: Turkey, Israel, and Iran. All have the capacity to remain stable and have economic potential and can project power beyond their borders. The Arab world seems to be running in the opposite direction. I do not see the basic elements required for good governance or democratic change. To enable democracy, you need three things: leaders who can rise above their narrow sectarian beliefs and think of the nation as a whole; institutions that reflect the popular will; and a mechanism to debate the most contentious and volatile issues without an explosion into violence.

The United States has figured out how to do this, but think about it; it took us 150 years to reconcile the promise contained in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal with the reality that our own Constitution validated slavery. And on the issue of racial bias and equality, we're not there yet. How long is it going to take societies that don't have the natural advantages that we do? This is a key question. The degree to which we can shape the internal politics of Egypt and Syria—let me remind you that we had 140,000 American forces deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan for ten years. How much more power and influence are required? How much power and time will it take to turn Egypt into a democracy?

Let me make one last observation about Syria. Our policy on Syria is amoral, not immoral. We are the largest single donator of humanitarian aid, we have driven the political process toward

reconciliation to the extent that there is one, but we have chosen to allow other factors, other than moral and ethical and humanitarian ones, to drive our policy. Now, some people would argue that that is a complete abdication of our moral responsibility—160,000 dead. Soon Syria is likely to produce the largest refugee flow since the end of WWII. I happen to agree with the president's policy on Syria. He has decided that militarizing the US role in an open-ended military conflict is a mistake. At the same time, we should recognize that there will be costs to our inaction.

And, finally, the Arab-Israeli issue; it is something that I have worked on for most of my career. I wish that I could say, after working for half a dozen secretaries of state, that we have produced a breakthrough on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. We didn't. It is quite clear why John Kerry failed. He can't succeed because the gaps on the core issues that drive the conflict—borders, security, refugees, Jerusalem, recognition of Israel as the Jewish state—the gaps between the two leaders are simply too large to bridge. In the history of the world, the expression goes, no one washed a rental car." Do you know why you don't wash a rental car? Because you care only about what you own. The same principle is applicable in life, politics, and diplomacy. Abbas and Netanyahu like the process, but they are not prepared to pay the price of what it will cost to bring the process to an end. I don't care how bad we want it; we aren't capable or willing to impose it. And even if we could, it wouldn't last. As a consequence, after nine or ten months, Kerry's efforts are suspended. I assume Kerry will pick it up again. There is no magical, philosophical, religious reason why the Palestinians and Israelis can't resolve this conflict. It just requires three things that aren't there now: 1) leaders who are prepared to become masters of their political constituencies, not prisoners of them; 2) ownership; 3) urgency, enough pain and gain to motivate Israelis and Palestinians to risk changing the status quo.

Let me close with a more uplifting thought, Jack Kennedy was the first and last president who ever had an emotional impact on me. He described himself as an idealist without illusion. That is a wonderful idea because it allows you to continue to hope that the world can be transformed, things can be fixed, but as you go through the process of trying to fix things, even transform them, Kennedy warns all of us to go through it with our eyes wide open because the prospects of not doing that for America in 2014 have become prohibitive.

**Dr. Schwab:** Aaron, I must say that this was unique in the annals of the National Committee's history. You were philosophizing, which

has not been done in the forty years that I have been with the NCAFP. You have given us much food for thought. Let me just ask a simple question, when you speak of transacting, is that like managing? Could you use the word “managing”?

**Miller:** I would argue to all people that instead of looking at this as a region that is going to be transformed and prone to lasting solutions; instead of looking for solutions, look for outcomes. The outcome doesn't have to be negative, it can be better than the current situation. It can be the way station on the road to a solution.

Life is about finding the balance about the way the world is and the way you want it to be. It means recognizing that no one gets 100%. There are all kinds of uncertainties that need to be factored into the analysis. There is a certain reassurance in the uncertainty.

**QUESTION ONE:** You mentioned Saudi Arabia briefly, what is your view on them?

**Miller:** The kings survived the Arab awakening in much better shape than any of the other four republics. It is the paradox of paradoxes. As the revolutions swept through the region, it was not those countries where you witnessed the incredible courageous brave citizens of all ages risking their lives for dignity and freedom. The governments that have fared the best are the kings. This doesn't just apply to Saudi Arabia. Why is this? In large part, it is because they are much less extracting rulers, are perceived as much less cruel, and have money. There is plenty of money to retard, if not coopt, radical forces. Islam is another legitimating agent in places like Saudi Arabia and Morocco. If you were a member of the kingdom and looked around at the Arab Spring two or three years ago, what are you going to conclude? All of these things have conspired to keep the kings afloat. Saudi Arabia and the U.S.-Saudi relationship, for the foreseeable future are too big to fail. We are going through some of the worst times in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. They hate our policy in Egypt and Syria; they do not comprehend how for moral and strategic reasons we don't understand the threat that the Sunni jihadists pose. They hate our policy in Iraq because, for the first time in nearly a thousand years, a Shi'a rules in Baghdad. We poured billions into Iraq and the Saudis hate our policy because they see Maliki as influenced by their true nemesis—which is the one country they fear, Iran. Iran is a serious country and it fashions itself a great power in a region of small powers. We just sold Saudi Arabia and the UAE almost \$60 billion in military equipment. The relationship is tense and problematic.

**QUESTION TWO:** Since Truman, the United States has been involved in the Middle East trying to broker some kind of deal between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Why couldn't any president manage to get them to come to an agreement?

**Miller:** We have succeeded three times in the Arab-Israeli conflict: Kissinger, Carter, and Baker: Kissinger for his disengagement diplomacy, Carter building on Sadat's trip to Jerusalem; and Baker for the Madrid talks.

Serious diplomacy has been done. We have come a long way since 1948. Through deterrence, Israel and Hezbollah and Israel and Hamas have come to a status quo. Since the 1950s, there was a major Middle Eastern conflict in every decade except in the 1990s. We have had intifadas and incursions and a war in Lebanon, but not since 1982 have you seen this kind of severity of conflict. Every breakthrough was preceded by a change in the locals' calculations, which we, the United States, had nothing to do with.

The United States is critically important once there is a substantial amount of pain and gain—the two forces in life that make people and nations do stuff that we could not ordinarily do or we would want to postpone. Diplomacy is not that much different than watching people behave.

You need to wash the rental car. Once you wash the rental car, you are getting serious. Now, just maybe if you have a willful and skillful president and secretary of state, then maybe you can do this. In my view, having worked for the last several administrations, we have not had a willful and skillful president and secretary of state. Not since Kissinger [Nixon] and Baker {the first Bush} have we had presidents that are truly willing to watch the backs of their secretaries of state.

**QUESTION THREE:** Given your analysis of the correlation of forces between Israelis and Palestinians, what made Kerry take on this huge initiative?

**Miller:** Kerry's predecessor, a woman who I respect greatly, was caught in a very difficult situation. She worked for a president, who, in my judgment, is the most controlling foreign policy president since Nixon. He dominates, he doesn't delegate. You combine that with Hillary Clinton's own risk aversion. That is to say, these problems are not ready for resolution. Second-term presidents can no longer dominate—he has to delegate and there are too many

problems abroad and the domestic agenda is critical. Enter John Kerry, who has wanted this job for a long time, who sees himself as no other secretary of state has. You combine his risk readiness and Obama's willingness to delegate and that sets the stage. Combine that with the fact that he believes that settling the conflict would be a huge advantage for the United States and its credibility, add to that that he would like to become a truly consequential secretary of state. How do you do that? You identify one issue, take a whack at it, and try to make it better. John Kerry believes that he has the skills to bring Netanyahu and Abbas around. He has 1,000 days left on the clock. A lot can happen.

**QUESTION FOUR:** What are the results you expect the Obama administration to achieve in the balance between doing enough and not doing anything at all? What is your analysis?

**Miller:** The trend lines do not look good. Forget Ukraine, which is a terrible situation for the president's legacy. In the long term, this will prove costly for Putin, but, in the short term, Putin is having his way. We look weak as far as Putin moving into Crimea and his ability to destabilize Ukraine. If we put all our money into sanctions, we will not be pleased because Europe has a huge trade investment and they are not prepared to go the full length. Ukraine hangs over all of this. In the Middle East, with Iran, there is both the will and capacity to reach an agreement. How it will play out, and whether or not it happens by July, I am not sure. This will probably be his signature achievement. I do not see involvement in Syria and I do not see war in Syria. The Israeli-Palestine issue, it is hard to imagine that you can end the conflict and get the agreement. The Arab world will continue and this is a very long movie. The region thinks more in terms of generations. Twenty-two democracies since 1950 have maintained their democratic character. The arc on many of these developments is much longer than the four-to-eight-year increments we gauge our politics on. It takes a generation to create change. It is safe to say that this region and most of its challenges will remain for the next president.



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