

*From Sadat to Saddam: The Decline of American Diplomacy in the Middle East.* David J. Dunford. Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2019. ISBN: 2370000713155

It is quite possible that a more timely book could not have been written. The professionalism that US Ambassadors developed over the twentieth-century has served America well. As the top representative of their country in a foreign land and depending on the location of their posting, these men and women are gauged as having an essential role in ensuring US interests are met. Nevertheless, most Americans do not know what an Embassy's role is, let alone an Ambassador's. In *From Sadat to Saddam: The Decline of American Diplomacy in the Middle East*, Ambassador David J. Dunford pulls back the curtain on what the work of a diplomat consists of on a day-to-day basis. In doing so, Ambassador Dunford consciously draws the reader's attention to the slow decline of professionalism within the diplomatic corps. He makes it clear that this is primarily due to the politicization and militarization of the diplomatic service as a whole. Refreshingly, Dunford does not add to the politicization as he blames Democratic and Republican administrations alike for the declining state of American diplomacy.

At its heart, *From Sadat to Saddam* is an autobiography. Throughout the book, Ambassador Dunford provides vignettes about everything from the parrot his family inherited and later passed to another foreign service officer, to running laps and playing tennis to keep fit. These everyday moments, along with his discussion on the creation of a bar inside the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, provide a more accurate account of an embassy official's daily routine than most other accounts. Dunford's straight-forward yet relaxed style allows the reader to easily follow his growth from embassy staffer to Ambassador and on to his roles as a senior mentor to troops about to depart to the Middle East war zones. Furthermore, while these stories are important in their way, it is the Ambassador's detailed analysis of the militarization and politicization of U.S. diplomacy that makes this book an essential read.

Dunford's recounting of his early experiences as an American diplomat is teeming with clues to the direction he is taking the reader. Throughout the book, the Ambassador provides details about how the State Department had groomed employees to become top-notch officials. From small things such as ambassadors letting people do their jobs without interference to encouraging embassy personnel to expand their knowledge of the country they were serving or the programs the State Department were running, Dunford creates a narrative of a State Department mentality designed to find and prepared quality candidates to represent the United States abroad with class and dignity. Dunford's description of how embassies worked with the State Department in Washington D.C. to transmit information to the White House provides readers with an idea of how America's diplomats worked in harmony with one another and officials in the nation's capital. Each time he points out the quick thinking of diplomats or the coordination of information and resources by embassy officials, Dunford is crafting a narrative of a diplomatic corps that works, or instead was working, until the profession became corrupted by politics and militarization.

Dunford spends the majority of the book providing readers with an understanding of how American diplomacy worked successfully. In the final third of the book, he begins providing details about professional diplomats being forced out of the service and replaced with more political personalities. To be sure, Dunford understands that some ambassadorial appointments are political and that all ambassadors serve at the pleasure of the president. Nevertheless, in *From Sadat to Saddam*, the sidelining of embassy officials in favor of Defense Department personnel during the 2003 invasion of Iraq represents a sea change in who is representing the US

abroad. It is more than clear that this change in policy starved the United States of knowledgeable people who knew how not only to operate in foreign countries, but also what it took to accomplish their goals of nation-building. According to Dunford, almost every misstep the US made in Iraq could have been prevented if President Bush had allowed the State Department to do its job rather than allowing American diplomacy in the region to be militarized.

Although *From Sadat to Saddam* takes aim at the overall politicization and militarization of the diplomatic service, Dunford seems to be most unsettled with the Defense Department under Donald Rumsfeld. The Ambassador takes umbrage with the ‘minders’ who were placed with the few State Department officials allowed into Iraq as a means of ensuring that Rumsfeld’s vision was the one being implemented. Those State Department officials who dared criticize Rumsfeld were removed from theatre or prevented from entering. Readers will be acutely aware of the humiliation felt by the career foreign service workers as they watched the State Department become irrelevant in the rebuilding of Iraq. Dunford subtly argues that the humiliation of the State Department would continue with the result being the growing number of bodies in the streets of Iraq. The sidelining the diplomats whose job it is to understand local culture and provide understanding of the nuances that make a country tick, the Defense Department, according to Dunford ‘destroyed any possibility of success’ in Iraq.

There is a brief moment in the final chapter where Dunford allows the reader to believe that the US government had learned from its mistakes. His description of the countless Leader Development and Education for Sustained Peace presentations to members of the military who were preparing to go into Iraq and Afghanistan lead one to believe that US leaders did value the knowledge members of the foreign service held. Alas, the Ambassador points out that those opportunities to transfer knowledge to soldiers and marines also became politicized and brought to an end due to lack of funding.

In the end, David Dunford’s *From Sadat to Saddam* is a terrific read and is an interesting contribution to the growing number of books by former ambassadors. His insight provides an honest appraisal of the decline of US diplomacy and provides an outline of how America’s diplomatic corps can rebuild.

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