Hindsight Does Not Hide Bias- a review of ‘Second Chance’ by Zbigniew Brzezinski

Just read Second Chance by Zbigniew Brzezenski, Carter’s National Security Advisor

He grades the last three Presidents- Bush 1 gets a ‘B’, Clinton a ‘C’ and not surprisingly W gets an ‘F’.

The author has the brilliance of hindsight, but the difficulty of making these decisions under the real time pressures of the job and the complicated uncertainty makes such retro analysis cheap and easy. While he criticizes Bush 2 for fear mongering, the national paranoia after 911 was very real. Combined with the hubris of success in Kuwait in the first Gulf War and in Afghanistan it is not difficult to understand our willingness to take unilateral action at that time.

Brzezinski asks for a different approach and repeats “the strength of a great power is diminished if it ceases to serve an idea”. Clearly Bush 2 took a different approach and treated terrorism as an act of war rather than a crime. He clearly had an idea to stop the rise of terrorism by changing regimes and instilling a democratic form of government hoping it would change the culture that spawns terrorism. For a while it even seemed as if it was working.

Bush 2, unlike his predecessors had to address a major attack on our soil. While the loss of life may have been small compared to other conflicts, the emotional impact was far greater. Bush’s deliberate response that this war would not be fought here took the battle to the source. Brzezinski does not really differentiate the difference in climate the third president faced. In fact the failings of Carter, the retreats of Reagan, and the missed opportunities of Bush 1 and Clinton

fell at Bush 2’s doorstep in a way that precluded him from not acting strongly.

Zbibniew was Carter’s National Security Advisor and shares his former boss’ proclivity to blame Israel disproportionately for the conflict. He finds it too easy to excuse Arafat’s intransigence even for his refusal of the Clinton/ Barak offer which many considered generous to a point of suicide. Like Carter he seems to blame all of the violent escalation in the Middle East on American failures to exploit opportunities and on Israel’s and America’s lack of willingness or ability to negotiate smarter.

Brzezinski makes some valid points, especially about the Americans’ general ignorance on the world outside our borders, but given the horrible legacy of Carter’s foreign policy (he praised the Ayatollah as a man of God and a man of peace), criticism from his National Security Advisor rings hollow.