

Book Review | The Education of an Idealist by Samantha Power

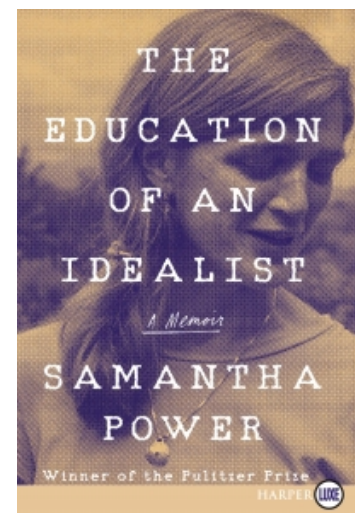
*In **The Education of an Idealist**, Samantha Power offers a political memoir that traces her life story from her beginnings as an Irish immigrant to the US through to her work as a war correspondent in the Balkans and her ascent to the White House, where she served as President Barack Obama's human rights adviser and became the youngest ever US Ambassador to the United Nations. This gripping, candid and witty book tells the story of Power's efforts to bring about a different kind of US foreign policy and reveals the tensions that arose between acting on the dictates of governance and responding to human suffering, writes **Chris Harmer**.*



President Barack Obama talks with Amb. Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, following a Cabinet meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House, Sept. 12, 2013. Picture: (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza) ([Obama White House US Government Work](#))

***The Education of an Idealist*. Samantha Power. HarperCollins. 2019.**

[The Education of an Idealist](#) chronicles Samantha Power's beginnings from Irish immigrant to the US, through to working as a war correspondent in the Balkans and her ascent to the White House, where she served as President Barack Obama's human rights adviser. In 2013 she was sworn in as the youngest ever US ambassador to the United Nations. By then already established as an academic, journalist and author, what characterised Power above all was an unwavering compulsion to advocate for more effective responses to humanitarian crises. The same humanitarian impulse, which was forged during her early years covering the war in Bosnia, is at the heart of her 2003 Pulitzer Prize-winning work, [A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide](#). The essence of her new book, *The Education of an Idealist*, is the story of her efforts to bring about a different kind of US foreign policy: one that, in her words, would 'muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil'.



It was Power's case for more nuanced thinking in foreign policy that brought her to the attention of the then Senator for Illinois, Barack Obama, in 2005. Having spent five years investigating America's response to twentieth-century genocides, Power had advocated a range of policy options between inaction in the face of mass atrocities and all-out 'boots on the ground' military intervention. After Power's *A Problem From Hell* was brought to Senator Obama's attention, the two met in Washington. The chapter about their first meeting includes a very telling comment by Obama – a portent of much of what was to follow. When discussing the US-led war in Iraq, Obama expressed disdain for the George W. Bush administration's intervention and the folly of 'regime change'. Power recalls: 'For him, it seemed like malpractice to judge one's prospects by one's intentions, rather than making a strenuous effort to anticipate and weigh potential consequences.' For Obama, such pragmatism was to become the hallmark of his foreign policy. For Power, the encounter proved pivotal – few humanitarian activists cross into the political domain to be held accountable for the outcome of their actions, not simply the justness of their intentions.

As if to accentuate the significance of Power's transition from outsider activist to White House staffer, *The Education of an Idealist* is divided into two parts: the first concerns her childhood, journalism and academic career; the second how she attempted to bring her convictions to bear in the two successive Obama administrations where she served as Director for Multilateral Affairs in the National Security Council before becoming Ambassador to the UN.

Central to the book are the tensions and conflicts that arose between acting on the dictates of governance and acting in the face of widespread human suffering. The climax of *The Education of an Idealist* is the story of ten days in August 2013 when that tension was at its most intense. The key question then under consideration by the Obama administration was the one expressed by the President himself when he asked: ['What message will we send if a dictator can gas hundreds of children to death in plain sight and pay no price?'](#)

Power was just three weeks into her role as UN ambassador when, in the early hours of 21 August 2013, news broke of a suspected chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria. Contemporaneous [US government estimates put the number of dead at 1,429](#), including at least 426 children, which would make it the worst chemical attack since [Halabja](#) a quarter-century earlier. The 'clear and convincing evidence' of the [use of Sarin gas](#) subsequently reported by the UN investigating team represented a grave breach of the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. From her vantage point in the White House Situation Room, Power reveals just how close the administration came to military intervention in Syria in the immediate aftermath of the attack: 'Obama had concluded that the costs of not responding forcefully were greater than the risks of taking military action.' The atrocity came almost a year to the day after [the President made clear what his response would be](#): 'That's a red line for us and [...] there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly.'

In the critical hours and days that followed, Obama mobilised his administration for military intervention. He instructed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (the nation's most senior military figure) to identify and draw up targets for air strikes; Power was told to get the UN mission in Damascus 'shut down now' (lest the UN be used as a human shield against strikes); White House lawyers began constructing the legal case for the use of force, drawing on the precedent established in Kosovo where force had been used without UN Security Council authorisation. At one point Obama asked: 'If I gave the order Sunday night, could this be done as early as Monday?' The Chairman of the JCS affirmed it could. And then? Through gripping storytelling, Power relates how she received a call at night in the Waldorf Astoria, New York (then the official residence of the US Ambassador to the UN). National Security Advisor Susan Rice cut her short with the news that the President had gone from 'wanting to go and go yesterday' to deciding that he would seek authorisation from Congress for the use of force before proceeding with military strikes to punish Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government.

The narrative begs the question: what made Obama blink in the face of a war crime and opt not to proceed with strikes without the authorisation of Congress? As Commander in Chief, he had the power to do so.

Power asserts that had the UN team not still been present in Damascus four days after the chemical attack, Obama would have authorised strikes on the night of 25 August 2013. She further contends that in going to Congress Obama miscalculated: 'Had he known he would fail, I did not believe he would have chosen the path he did.' (Her use of the past tense here is perhaps telling.) But it would most likely have been clear to Obama that political partisanship in the House meant he could not count on Congressional support. Obama's memoirs, to be published next year, may reveal more, but the myriad potential outcomes of US intervention in Syria would have weighed heavily in balancing the case for the air strikes that Power and Rice advocated. The legal grounds for military action were far from clear cut. The route to UN Security Council authorisation for the use of force was blocked by Russia. There was the danger of drawing in other powers and unleashing a wider conflagration. Syria's chemical weapons could not be taken out by strikes alone – meaning their further use could not be ruled out. ([Indeed, their use has been reported again.](#))

Also, around the time the President made his decision to go to Congress, it would have become clear to Obama that he could not rely on the support of coalition partners. Here, Power gives surprisingly short shrift to events across the Atlantic where in Britain, US-led air strikes were under consideration in Parliament and where precisely the same factors confronting parliamentarians mirrored those faced by Congress. Again and again, the spectre of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq loomed as MPs rose in turn to debate a motion to join US-led intervention. Again and again, the absence of post-war planning, the loss of blood and treasure in wars of 'regime change' and fears of open-ended commitment were invoked. On 30 August 2013, after an impassioned debate, the UK Parliament [ruled out joining US-led strikes](#) by 285 votes to 272 – a fact relegated to a footnote in Power's account.

The very next day [Obama's speech](#) made clear that he would not act without the authorisation of Congress, effectively shutting down the possibility of a military response to the attacks of 21 August 2013. Despite Power's efforts to garner support in Congress for intervention, they came to nothing; the vote never happened. Power laments that: 'We would have countless meetings and debates on Syria over the next three and a half years, but he [Obama] would never again consider the kind of risk he had been prepared to bear in the immediate aftermath of the August 21st attack.' The window of opportunity for intervention in Syria under the Obama administration closed for good – a significant milestone in the tragedy that has engulfed the country, and for the system of a rules-based international order prohibiting chemical warfare.

Power's conclusions on Syria are in marked contrast to those in the earlier chapters on Libya, where the US intervened in 2011 following the uprising in the opposition stronghold of Benghazi. The threat of a massacre was made explicit when Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi threatened to '[cleanse Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, alley by alley, person by person, until the country is cleansed of dirt and scum.](#)' Under US leadership a resolution 'to take all necessary measures' was passed by the UN Security Council authorising the use of force to protect civilians. It is reported that Obama came to view Libya as the [worst mistake of his presidency](#) for failing to plan for what would happen after the strikes. But despite the country's fragmentation into lawlessness and chaos, Power stands by the intervention as being the right thing to do: 'The US had helped orchestrate the fastest and broadest international response to an impending human rights crisis in history.'

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these memoirs is the extraordinary openness of the author, which makes for compelling reading (although it may occasionally curl the toes of readers at the more reserved end of the frankness spectrum). Given the warts-and-all honesty of Power, there is one curious lapse of candour: her silence on Guantanamo. Obama had made it a campaign and presidential pledge to close the camp but it didn't happen. It is odd that as human rights adviser she omits this episode – a silence that perhaps conveys another tension between Power's convictions and her loyalty to the administration in which she served.

Also striking for a political memoir is the humour. *The Education of an Idealist* is replete with colour, insight and anecdotes, some laugh-out-loud funny, including the time when unbeknown to Power, Obama was within earshot when she took a call from her stepfather on her mobile in the White House. Caring for Power's infant in her absence, he became increasingly frustrated at not being able to fathom a fiddly feeding device for his baby granddaughter. The call became audibly more fraught until Obama grabbed the mobile to give the instruction: 'Listen, this is the President of the United States. You can do this. You just need to stay calm and focus.' Some minutes elapsed before he handed back the phone with the words: 'He's got this.'

Part-political memoir and part-autobiography, the chapters on Syria may well reignite the ire of Power's critics who accuse her of betraying her principles for power. But the wit, honesty and storytelling will likely have broader appeal beyond foreign policy circles. The story of her journey from intern to White House staffer may prove particularly educational and inspirational for younger readers. Power's inability to overcome Obama's resistance to deeper involvement in Syria clearly remains a source of anguish for her and others who served under him – notably those who came of age at the time of the genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda. But Power served in an administration that also did much to promote human rights. [Thousands of Iraqi Yazidis who fled ISIS in 2014 were provided safe passage following US air strikes](#) that Power and others advocated. She helped persuade the UN Security Council to define the Ebola epidemic as a threat to [international peace and security](#), energising the mobilisation of a multinational response including the deployment of US troops. [Power's pioneering work in promoting LGBT rights](#) at the UN encouraged the first ever Security Council condemnation of attacks on the basis of sexual orientation. She might not always have succeeded in influencing US foreign policy to 'muster the imagination to reckon with evil', but *The Education of an Idealist* is the story of how Power helped achieve Obama's more modest and realistic definition of what constitutes success in political life: 'Better is good and better is actually a lot harder to achieve than worse.'

This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).

Chris Harmer is a writer with a background in journalism and communications for the BBC World Service, Overseas Development Institute, United Nations and Westminster Foundation for Democracy. She has written on humanitarian affairs for academic and human rights organisations and was a producer and editor of international news and current affairs radio programmes. She has postgraduate degrees in international relations and international law from the LSE and King's College, London.

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