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# Books

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**POLITICS** America's international missionary zeal can result in it overreaching itself, writes **Dennis Altman**.

## Warning to a high flier

### **The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris**

By Peter Beinart  
 Melbourne University Press,  
 \$34.99

**F**OUR years ago Peter Beinart published a book titled *The Good Fight: Why Liberals — and Only Liberals — Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*. There he called for a liberalism that battles Islamist totalitarianism as forthrightly as Cold War liberals opposed Communist totalitarianism.

Beinart had originally supported Bush's invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein, and he used that earlier book to demolish the reasons for so doing. Some of *The Good Fight* was a mea culpa, a partial admission that the United States was equipped neither to understand the complexities of Iraqi politics nor to build a democratic regime once it had overthrown the brutal Saddam dictatorship.

That argument has now been expanded and given greater historical depth in *The Icarus Syndrome*. Beinart warns of American hubris like that of Icarus, whose wings melted when he flew too close to

the sun, in a historical survey that runs from Woodrow Wilson's determination to redraw the map of Europe through the traumas of Vietnam to the American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Beinart, unlike those few Americans who are isolationist, does not want Icarus not to fly; rather he wants him to heed the warnings of his father not to fly too high. As Beinart says: "We remain a missionary nation, with an enduring desire to repair and redeem the world . . . Tempered by wisdom, American optimism is — and always will be — one of the great wonders of the world."

But *The Icarus Syndrome* suggests American optimism too often leads not just to overreach but to tragedy. When Bush attacked the Taliban government of Afghanistan, one Kremlin official observed that: "With regret . . . you're really going to get the hell kicked out of you." Had he been right, the United States would most likely not have invaded Iraq and would have limited its objectives in Afghanistan. It is ironic that had the bad guys been able to put up more resistance, many lives might have been saved.

Back in 2001, Colin Powell warned that Afghanistan could turn into another Vietnam, namely an endless civil war in which "victory" was illusive and persistent foreign

troops bred greater resistance. Today a decent American President is wrestling with the same questions, caught in the same illusions as his predecessors. Or perhaps, as Beinart hints, Obama's strategy is that of the ultimate realist: a short-term commitment with a clear withdrawal, even if it means leaving chaos behind.

His argument leads Beinart to some unexpected conclusions. It is hardly surprising that he dislikes Lyndon Johnson and Dick Cheney. It is more surprising that he has considerable admiration for Ronald Reagan, whose legacy in this account is closer to those of Eisenhower and Carter than to the belligerence that straddled American foreign policy from Kennedy to Nixon.

Reagan certainly built up American military strength, but he showed prudence in using it, and alienated many conservatives by his willingness to negotiate with the Soviet Union. One of the strengths of Beinart's book is that it demonstrates the big shift in neo-conservative thinking, from a hard-headed realism, which often tolerated thugs and bullies as allies, to a messianic interventionism, which sought to impose democracy throughout the world.



There are omissions, as how could there not be in a book of such scope. Important countries that have undergone huge transformation, such as Indonesia and South Africa, are passed over without mention. Most surprising is the lack of discussion of Israel, and the strange coalition of Jewish liberals and evangelical Christians that has made the protection of Israel central to US foreign policy.

Recently Beinart published a strong critique of the Israeli government in *The New York Review of Books* that caused considerable controversy. His account of the Bush years, and the eagerness for war with Iraq, seems incomplete without mention of the importance of the Israeli alliance.

But *The Icarus Syndrome* is a book to be read and discussed. Beinart has mastered the art of combining historical analysis with journalistic insights, and he writes far better than most political scientists. The book has five pages of

acknowledgments and 390 endnotes, evidence of the wealth of support available to elite public commentators in the US.

Beinart is particularly strong on intellectual history, and the ways in which certain intellectual currents reinforced dominant trends in foreign policy during the past century. Perhaps he overstates the influence of several of his favourite thinkers — it seems odd that Reinhold Niebuhr and Francis Fukuyama are mentioned far more often than most Secretaries of State.

In 460 pages Australia does not appear once. But all Australian politicians, especially those who share the romantic illusions of American omnipotence, should read *The Icarus Syndrome*. Perhaps its publisher could send a copy to the new Prime Minister.

Dennis Altman is director of the La Trobe University Institute for Human Security and author of *Gore Vidal's America* and *51st State?*



In the matter of the Iraq War, President Barack Obama is wrestling with some of the same questions as his predecessors.

