

## The Internationalists: The Fight to Restore American Foreign Policy after Trump

By Alexander Ward

New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2024, 368 pages, \$32, ISBN: 9780593539088

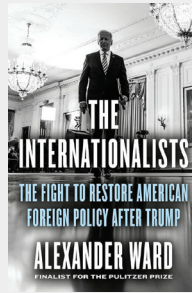
Reviewed by Nina Elghali, İstanbul Nişantaşı University

DOI: 10.25253/99.2026283.3

Alexander Ward's book, *The Internationalists*, offers a glimpse into the corridors of American power, where foreign policy is developed during critical historical turning points, such as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the global challenges of the post-Trump era.

Ward is an American journalist and an analyst specializing in foreign policy and national security. He works as a reporter and a writer for *Politico*, where he covers White House news, defense policy, and international relations. The book primarily discusses how the Biden Administration attempted to revive U.S. foreign policy after the first Trump Administration. Additionally, he reconstructs a multifaceted global political landscape from the perspective of the Biden national security team.

The book is divided into three parts, where Ward, in the first part of his book, titled "The Wilderness," illustrates the intellectual and political instability that the liberal movements encountered following Trump's 2016 victory. The book opens with an emotional moment, explaining how Jake Sullivan, a very perceptive political strategist according to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, where he was described as one of the most analytically sharp and strategically minded members of Biden's team, gazes at a TV screen, aston-



ished by Hillary Clinton's loss. This is not merely a personal moment. It also signifies the disintegration of a political structure that believed itself invulnerable. Ward also discussed in this part how political veterans, such as Sullivan and Blinken, and others began reassessing their global strategy. They recognized

that foreign policy must be directly aligned with the interests of the average American citizen and that the language of spreading democracy is no longer persuasive to the society that sees itself as marginalized by globalization's benefits. Therefore, it is evident that the Biden Administration's early efforts are aimed at reviving foreign alliances, particularly with NATO, and reversing the institutional decline in international relations that was caused by the Trump administration. In this part, Ward was introducing an emergence of a revised form of realistic liberalism that is more sensible and less utopian, yet nonetheless dedicated to diplomacy and multilateralism.

In the second part of the book, describing it as the most dramatic section, "The Great Humbling," Ward discusses the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, which resulted in a strategic and humanitarian catastrophe. The withdrawal was within the context of the 20-year U.S. war in Afghanistan, and despite its allegedly positive objectives, caused extensive human suffer-

ing and massive displacement. Although the withdrawal was accepted in the U.S., its execution was disastrous. Ward vividly describes the latter days in Kabul, detailing frantic talks within the White House and the chaotic scenes at Hamid Karzai Airport, where thousands of Afghans surged onto the runway while holding onto the wheels of the aircraft. A suicide explosion by ISIS-K resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of civilians. U.S. forces subsequently executed a drone strike that allegedly mistakenly resulted in the deaths of an innocent civilian family.

This part of the book primarily exposes the lack of planning and a significant disparity between intentions and brutal reality. Biden aimed to conclude the forever wars, although the way the Afghan conflict concluded undermined America's reputation as an organized and powerful nation. What is understood from this section is that the complicated process of disengaging from a war zone needs precise and pragmatic planning, which the Biden administration failed to have. In that, Ward rejects the idealistic concept of a perfect departure and illustrates that even moral-based intentions may result in catastrophic outcomes. However, the question remains: Was the withdrawal decision an act of moral intention?

The book's third part, "The Austin Powers Inspiration," continues to explain the second chance given to Biden's Administration after the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. This section argues how the world witnessed a new conflict when Putin initiated his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Biden Administration transitioned from a defensive stance to one of spreading the global democratic coalition through proactive diplomatic and strategic approaches. Especially after

their failure in Afghanistan, Biden's administration initiated a couple of unusual actions, such as disclosing sensitive intelligence publicly to counter Russian disinformation (false flag operations). They also established an urgent international coalition to provide Ukraine with financial aid, armaments, and intelligence support, thereby reinforcing faith in NATO and advocating for its expansion. Even with all these initiatives, the U.S. continued to maintain its strategy of avoiding direct confrontations with Russia, while effectively mitigating its influence through a proxy strategy. Furthermore, Ward highlighted the role of Zelensky, who evolved from a leader of questionable legitimacy to a universal figure of resilience and democracy, alongside Blinken, Sullivan, and Sherman, who were referred to in the book as the internationalists who emerged as the architects of the American response. Following the fall of Kabul, the same team was able to establish itself as a base of stability and leadership.

The internationalists emerged as a powerful group attempting to reshape America's global role, emphasizing partnership rather than hegemony. Alexander Ward examined the Biden Administration's efforts as it engages in two ongoing struggles: the first is to reestablish international confidence, and the second is to persuade Americans that foreign policy is not an elite luxury but a critical national concern. The book illustrates how a group of politicians, despite their ties to traditional elites, can learn from their failures and evolve from simple sloganeers to effective politicians. It demonstrates how the internationalists have transitioned from theoretical discourse to decisive action in a world that no longer tolerates simple errors.

The book wisely avoids any shallow heroic narrative, acknowledging that even estab-

lishment-endorsed political figures, such as Henry Kissinger and his decision to bomb Cambodia, or even Napoleon Bonaparte and his critical error in invading Russia in 1812, can be examples of politicians who fell victim to miscalculations, as evident in Afghanistan. But despite the depth of the narrative, the book falls into the pitfall of American Centrality. Despite the vast amount of information collected from the Biden Administration, we notice a lack of opposing views; the book does not provide space for the perceptions of the impacted nations (Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia) regarding these policies. That might leave the reader wondering whether the internationalists can ever escape the “we know best” mindset. Apart from that, the book occasionally appears to be soft on the errors of the American leadership, particularly in Kabul. In that, we see it barely questioning the institutional premises that permitted the disregard of warnings, nor does it reevaluate the liberal interventionist doctrine that continues to influence many American policymakers.

To sum it up, this book is not a work that praises idealism. Instead, it serves as a biography of a political generation attempting to overcome past errors and construct a more equitable and responsible future. The book offers a unique opportunity to understand the inner workings of American decision-making institutions. Where the context shifts from the private rooms of the White House to

diplomatic discussions with Russia and to the devastated airport in Kabul, capturing moments of nervousness, victory, and failure.

Alexander Ward integrated political journalism with narrative fiction, delivering a work rich in information and sourced by authentic testimonials while avoiding the errors of a dull academic discourse. The context of the book is presented from the perspective of American institutions, primarily reflecting the official or semi-official stance of the ruling party, with a near-total absence of alternative or international perspectives. Nevertheless, it addresses significant errors, such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan, with some mitigation or justification, merely arguing the shock without fully investigating its underlying causes.

The book is recommended for anybody interested in international politics, American relations, and the ethics of power. However, it is recommended to be read with a critical eye since it is more suitably regarded as an insider’s perspective on a specific political time, rather than as an impartial or complete reference. The book’s reliance on U.S. sources primarily means it may lack insight from an international perspective, which could limit its objectivity. It is a book that clarifies the analytical processes of American decision-makers; however, it does not guarantee the complete truth.