

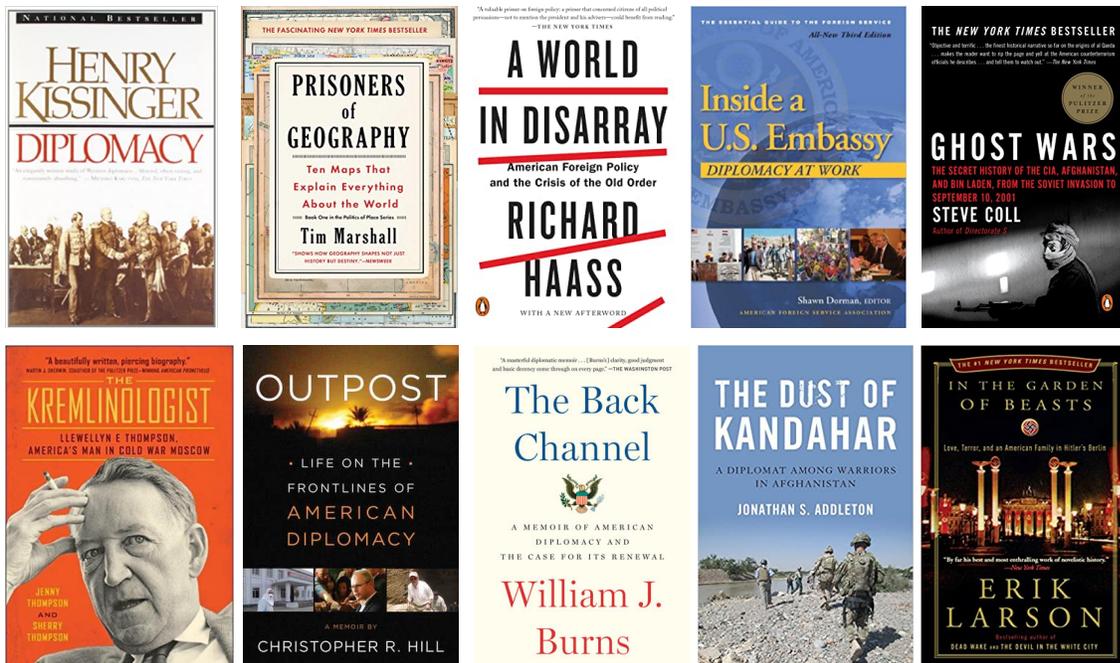
Ten on a Topic: Diplomacy, Its History, Practice, and People

Rona Simmons, September 22, 2020

Toward the end of his book on Diplomacy, Henry Kissinger writes, “The emerging international system is far more complex than any previously encountered by American diplomacy.” In my reading on diplomacy I learned how true these words are and what a challenge the practice and indeed “art” of diplomacy are.

The ten books I selected on diplomacy cannot possibly capture all of the topic’s facets, but they provide an excellent overview. The list is diverse, from books on the history of international relations to first-hand accounts from people who have devoted their lives to foreign service, to biographies of statesmen, and a work of narrative nonfiction. Following my comments are those from Jonathan S. Addleton who has spent most of his life abroad in service to our country. As he departed from an assignment in Afghanistan, he wrote in his book, *The Dust of Kandahar*, that he had “the lingering hope that our conversations may actually lead to something.” His was a remark I found expressed in different words by several of the authors below

(Note: unless noted otherwise the comments that follow are my own.)



General Background and History

1. *Diplomacy* by Henry Kissinger (Simon and Schuster, 1994)

At 836 pages, the very large tome *Diplomacy* befits its author, the fifty-sixth secretary of state, politician, diplomat, geopolitical consultant and Harvard professor. What list of books on diplomacy could possibly exclude this one?

Kissinger takes the reader across centuries of world history, illuminating the present through an examination of the past. In the opening paragraphs, he notes, “In every century there seems to emerge a country, with the power, the will, and the intellectual and moral impetus to shape the entire international system in accordance with its own values.” France in the 1600s, for example, and the emergence of nation states; Britain in the 1700s when countries relied on the established balance of power among states to mitigate conflict; Austria and Germany in the 1800s, and America in the 1900s.

The roots of American exceptionalism Kissinger traces back to two statesmen of the early 1900s, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Despite their differences, they left a legacy in the belief that America plays a beneficent role in the world. As we enter the age of a new world order, Kissinger notes by examining how statesmen have dealt with problems of their time and how their decisions and actions reflect their own cultures is the beginning of understanding diplomacy. He sees America’s self-appointed mission of global reform challenged by nationalism and competition that we did not expect. He concludes by saying, “The emerging international system is far more complex than any previously encountered by American diplomacy.”

2. ***Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World*** by Tim Marshall (Scribner, 2015)

Maps, the old-fashioned, paper kind, are tantalizing objects. Spread them across a table and peer at them close up to spot the villages and cities marked by tiny dots and circles, or trace a finger along a graveled path or a super-highway, or travel the entire expanse of a mountain range on a single page. Maps, or rather the geography and topography that define a country or a region, are also major factors in determining how wars, politics, and social development of a given people evolve. At least that is the assertion of Tim Marshall in this volume of his series on the politics of place.

“Technology,” he writes “may seem to overcome the distances between us in both mental and physical space, but it is easy to forget that the land where we live, work, and raise our children is hugely important and that the choices of those who lead the seven billion inhabitants of this planet will to some degree always be shaped by the rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes, and seas that constrain us all...”

Through the maps, Marshall explains how access to oceans helped make today’s superpowers, how diplomats drew lines across a territory with the intent of establishing order only to set the stage for the next conflict by ignoring the geography and cultural divides on that same spot of land. He also contemplates how diplomacy will help mediate conflict over the discovery of oil in the artic.

3. ***A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*** by Richard Haas (Penguin Press, 2017)

In this fascinating page turner, Haas explains how we (the United States) and the world came to be where we are today—facing enormous challenges on the regional and global level. His premise is built on the events of relevant periods of modern history. The first spans the early to mid 1900s, with its two world wars and the cold war. Then, he argues global interaction was based on traditional approaches to international relations with state

sovereignty at the core (linking back to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia). His second tranche is the late 1900s, a period of relative stability and one without direct conflict between major powers, brought about in part by the primacy of the United States.

Unfortunately, this period ended as the world fell into disarray, victims of the Thucydides Trap (a tendency towards war when an emerging power threatens to displace an existing power as the international hegemon). Haas is frank in his assessment and points to the failures of the United States as the dominant power to be consistent in its foreign policy and to be all too willing to interfere in matters that were not always justified. From where we are today, he asserts, “It is not business as usual and so it can’t be foreign policy as usual.”

For the next period, what Haas calls World Order 2.0. his prescriptions include a commitment to the process of diplomacy and holding forward-looking consultations rather than “negotiations.”

Diplomacy in Action

4. *Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work* by Shawn Dorman (Foreign Service Books, 2011)

In Part I of his book, Shawn Dorman profiles twenty-three individuals with titles and responsibilities that represent the wide range of activities and issues facing an embassy. In some embassies there are thousands of employees and in others only a handful. Fourteen thousand people work in foreign service, two-thirds of whom serve multi-year tours of duty in our 265 diplomatic posts abroad. “There is no typical day,” says former Ambassador to Armenia, Marie Yovanovitch, which she goes on to say is why she loves the work.

The rest of the book addresses daily life in the Foreign Service with reports from each of the embassy staff identified in Part I in sites from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Dorman also explains how embassy employees handle natural disasters, riots, terrorist attacks, and help build new nations, and in so doing have a hand in making history. Finally, for those who might be interested in a career in the Foreign Service, Dorman offers advice from choosing a type of work to preparing for service. At its core, however, working in an embassy is about serving one’s country. It is a way of life too, one that involves not only the diplomat but their family.

5. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* by Steve Coll (Penguin Books, 2004)

We know Massoud, we know bin Laden, and we know what happened in 2001, but the events that brought us from the Islamic uprisings in 1979 (the Iran hostage crisis, the assault on the American embassy in Pakistan, and the attacks at Mecca in Saudi Arabia) to the attacks on American soil in 2001 are less well known. Steve Coll tells the story of these events through actions of the CIA.

Per Coll, the CIA played a most unusual part in the “wars” or covert actions during the regional war that “shifted so often it existed in a permanent shroud.” It was a war waged among ghosts: the radical Islamic fighters, the CIA supplied Afghan rebels, the spies from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and CIA agents as well as United States politicians, diplomats, and military officers. “Strand after strand of official covert action, unofficial covert action,

clandestine terrorism, and clandestine counterterrorism wove one upon the other to create the matrix of undeclared war that burst into sight in 2001.” The book offers insight in the role such operations play in our foreign policy.

The Diplomats

6. ***The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America’s Man in Cold War Moscow*** by Jenny Thompson and Sherry Thompson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018)

Like archeologists at a dig, Jenny and Sherry Thompson explore artifacts their father left behind. In the opening paragraphs, they write “a long, lean, and absurdly quiet man, Llewellyn E. Thompson Jr. is and was a mystery.” Mystery or not, the book reveals how this “absurdly quiet” manner served so well as a statesman.

Foreign service was Thompson’s chosen career; and he served in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations witnessing pre-World War II Russia and the paranoia and pogroms of Stalin and then the Cold War and the rise and threat of Khrushchev and America’s ascendancy as a world power.

As he gained experience, he became “more circumspect and less a carefree young man. He was never outspoken, always choosing his words carefully,” delving deep into the issues at hand and the public and private sentiments of the people involved before rendering an opinion. The daughters say, too, he was “an American in the traditional sense when character meant more than personality.” Thompson was content to play his role away from the spotlight, but nonetheless valued by the presidents he advised.

The book is an important primer for understanding the nature of the vital United States-Russia relationship.

7. ***Outpost: Life on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy: A Memoir*** by Christopher R. Hill (Simon & Schuster, 2014)

A career diplomat, Christopher Hill takes us to the frontlines in some of the most dangerous outposts of American diplomacy. In the prologue, as he motors through Iraq, Hill says he was there to do, “what US ambassadors do all over the world: meet with local officials and get a sense of what is on people’s minds outside the confines of the capital city.” And, while he conferred with heads of state, he also met with ordinary people who, he says, “all things being equal would probably have liked us to leave as soon as possible” and who we discover are all too prepared (at least in Iraq’s case) to make their points with roadside bombs.

Conversations in three very different situations reveal the difficulties he faced. In the Balkan States, Hill quotes the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, “You are superpower. If you want to say that Tuesday is Thursday, you can do that. It doesn’t matter what the rest of us think.” The North Koreans, he says, “have an annoying habit of agreeing to something, then coming back and not agreeing to what they had just agreed.” And, “If the opinion of local Iraqis was sought, to the favorite question, ‘What do you need?’ and if the answer as it often turned out to be, was ‘money,’ our response was, ‘We can work with you.’”

After three decades in the foreign service, Hill says, “what has not changed is that the world still looks to the United States to lead by example, what has changed is how we are

responding to these expectations. We live in a time when ideology is hotly debated and where there is a diminished consensus ...”

8. ***The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal*** by William J. Burns (Random House, 2019)

Burns played a role in some of the most consequential diplomatic episodes of his time from the end of the Cold War and the rise of Putin’s Russia, from 9/11 to the nuclear talks with Iran. A moment Burns recalls as perhaps one of America’s finest was at the Madrid Peace Conference when President George H. W. Bush brought together world leaders for Arab-Israeli peace talks. All were, he says, united less by their shared conviction about such a peace as their respect for American influence. He witnessed that influence decline over subsequent decades and by the time Clinton took the helm a return to authoritarianism in Russia, an aggressively hostile China, globalization of the world economy and a more fragmented international political system prevailed. He also noted the growing anxiety and backlash against globalization of recent years, together with the desire to free America from its old alliances and partnerships and reduce commitments overseas. While he admits, “fashioning a strategy for American in a post primacy world is no easy task,” Burns lays much of the blame for making matters worse at Trump’s door.

Regardless of his political leanings, Burns argues effectively for foreign and public service and for the restoration of diplomacy. He recognizes what he describes as our failures in the Mideast and regrets he did not make his opinions more forceful to avoid America’s invasion of Iraq and find a “different—more constructive—direction.”

9. ***The Dust of Kandahar: A Diplomat Among Warriors in Afghanistan*** by Jonathan S. Addleton (Naval Institute Press, 2016)

This book recounts the experiences of Ambassador Jonathan Addleton in his role as the senior civilian representative for the US Embassy in southern Afghanistan from 2012 to 2013. While much of the narrative describes routine (and seemingly endless meetings with generals, visiting congressional aides, Afghan politicians, and tribal leaders), sadly and poignantly, the “ramp ceremonies” he attended occur far too often. (Note: these ceremonies honor the day’s or week’s fallen soldiers as the military and diplomats prepare to send them home.)

Addleton expresses concern—indeed pessimism—about the future of Afghanistan after the United States withdrawal and although the Afghan generals believe their soldiers will perform to expectations, the great fear is that the Taliban are simply biding their time. Addleton says, “Our efforts at outreach followed the footsteps of those who preceded us. Now more than a decade later our task was mainly to pave the way for our own pending departure. We were charged with dispelling any sense of abandonment even as we prepared to leave.”

Vivid and touching vignettes are juxtaposed with accounts of the tragic loss of close friends and the author’s own near-death experience. At the end, Addleton asks if our presence was mostly symbolic or did it result in some measure of lasting change. Regardless, I came away with great respect for all those who serve under similar difficulties and am thankful to have people who are willing, even compelled, to take on these duties.

Narrative Nonfiction or a Novel

10. *In the Garden of the Beasts* by Erik Larson (Crown, 2011)

In 1933 against much opposition Roosevelt appointed a mild-mannered professor from Chicago and neophyte in diplomacy circles, William E. Dodd, as ambassador to Germany. The choice could not be more inappropriate—Hitler and the Nazis are flexing their muscles and circumstances call for an experienced and nuanced hand. From the outset, Dodd stumbles in his role. He breaks with “tradition” at every step. He and his family live not in the grand style of his predecessors, but modestly, eschewing a car and driver for his own brought-from-home Chrysler and electing to walk to work through the *Tiergarten*, or Garden of the Beasts, from whence the title. Dodd fails to appreciate the signs of coming troubles, the mounting attacks on Jews and censorship of the press, and is all too eager to take Hitler at his word—although, in this respect, Dodd is not unlike his fellow State Department and Roosevelt administration cohorts.

Dodd muddles through, becoming more aware and defiant. As evidence that truth is almost always stranger than fiction, his daughter, Martha, however, embarks on her own brand of diplomacy in the night clubs and salons of the fascist society and in the arms of even the head of the Gestapo. Both at one point sit across a table from Hitler, Dodd awed by the man’s ability to “project an aura of sincerity that blinded onlookers to his true beliefs” and Martha intrigued as she evaluates the Fuehrer in terms of another conquest.

There are many other lists of the best books about diplomacy. You may find the Brookings Institution list of interest (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/09/08/beyond-the-classics-a-fresh-international-relations-reading-list-for-students/>)

Lifelong Learning

Diplomacy appears to be a very narrow topic, one easily defined and digested. It is anything but. Reading on the topic took me from the early years of modern history with the emergence of nation states to the front lines of war and peace and from around the globe to the inside of an American embassy. It introduced me to statesmen, politicians, ambassadors, covert agents, and tribal leaders, and the causes for which they toil in service to their countries. My eyes are opened, and yet I have barely scratched the surface.

To lend a deeper perspective, I turned to Jonathan Addleton, a man who is at much at home in Macon, Georgia as he is in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Jonathan’s work in foreign service, as the eighth US Ambassador to Mongolia, a five-time USAID Mission Director, and Senior Civil Representative to Southern Afghanistan would likely be at the top of his resume, but he is also an author, a professor, and a photo-enthusiast. Today, when most of us would consider retiring, he is launching another chapter in his life, and another tour of duty abroad, once again in Pakistan, as Rector and President Elect of Forman Christian College. He offered the following comments on diplomacy and lifelong learning.



Former Ambassador Jonathan S. Addleton;
Addleton Attending a Book Exchange in Mongolia

A Diplomat's Life: There are many paths to becoming a foreign service officer. Mine included a graduate degree at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. I also worked for brief periods as an intern at the State Department, World Bank and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, all in Washington, DC. I joined the foreign service at the age of 27 and spent the next 32 years of my life there, serving in ten countries on three continents. I found so much of what I looked for in the foreign service including adventure, travel, and the opportunity to make a difference

Prerequisites for Joining the Foreign Service: Important qualities include curiosity and cultural awareness as well as strong interpersonal and communications skills. Tenuring as a foreign service officer requires knowledge of at least one foreign language—in my case that was Urdu. While it is useful to have experience living or working in a foreign country before joining the foreign service, it is not a requirement. However, when you join you do acknowledge that you are willing to be sent anywhere in the world.

Looking Forward, as a Diplomat: There are certain "hinge points" in history that also affect the conduct of foreign policy. World War II was one such hinge point; others include the Cold War, the break-up of the Soviet Union, 9/11, and now the rise of China as well as the ongoing pandemic. Against a backdrop of diminishing US power and influence, the next generation of diplomats will have to face many challenges, requiring them to be more nimble and innovative. Economics will be more important than ever, in some cases overshadowing the political reporting that has been the "bread and butter" of embassies for decades. Changes in communication and information technology are also drastically changing the international landscape in which diplomats work.

Foreign Service and Lifelong Learning: It is sometimes said that the first week in a new place teaches you more about that country than any number of books, allowing you to see and experience that country for yourself. And yet once you visit a new country you want to learn more about it in all its aspects—economic, political and cultural, among others. I have a small library of books on every country in which I have lived and worked. In my case that means ten small libraries, making it difficult to find room for them all. For someone who loves books and thinks lifelong learning is essential, that is a good problem to have!