



The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat

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In a brilliant and revealing book destined to drive debate about the future of American power, Vali Nasr questions America's dangerous choice to engage less and matter less in the world.

Vali Nasr, author of the groundbreaking *The Shia Revival*, worked closely with Hillary Clinton at the State Department on Afghan and Pakistani affairs. In *The Dispensable Nation*, he takes us behind the scenes to show how Secretary Clinton and her ally, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, were thwarted in their efforts to guide an ambitious policy in South Asia and the Middle East. Instead, four years of presidential leadership and billions of dollars of U.S. spending failed to advance democracy and development, producing mainly rage at the United States for its perceived indifference to the fate of the region.

After taking office in 2009, the Obama administration had an opportunity to fundamentally reshape American foreign policy, Nasr argues, but its fear of political backlash and the specter of terrorism drove it to pursue the same questionable strategies as its predecessor. Meanwhile, the true economic threats to U.S. power, China and Russia, were quietly expanding their influence in places where America has long held sway.

Nasr makes a compelling case that behind specific flawed decisions lurked a desire by the White House to pivot away from the complex problems of the Muslim world. Drawing on his unrivaled expertise in Middle East affairs and firsthand experience in diplomacy, Nasr demonstrates why turning our backs is dangerous and, what's more, sells short American power. The United States has secured stability, promoted prosperity, and built democracy in region after region since the end of the Second World War, he reminds us, and *The Dispensable Nation* offers a striking vision of what it can achieve when it reclaims its bold leadership in the world.

The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat Details

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From Reader Review The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat for online ebook

Daniel Frank says

I started off this book hating Obama's middle east policy but by the time I finished it, I understood it much better. This is quite ironic since the whole point of this book is to say how awful Obama's middle east policy is.

I disagreed with everything Nasr said, but I learnt a lot so I am still giving it 4 stars. The first two chapters are him saying how smart his ideas are and how horrible the Obama administrations are. At this point, I couldn't tell who was right but after reading chapter 3 on Iran, it became obvious.

His views on Iran are 100% wrong. Not only do they make little sense strategically, the chapter is filled with tons of incorrect information and severe errors of judgement. With all of this said, by the time one finishes this book, they will have a greater understanding of the situation in the ME going forward.

Honza Prchal says

This book may deserve a better rating than I gave it. It almost certainly does, but it is so very depressing. The counterpoint between it and Bing West's The Strongest Tribe is stark. Everything John McCain predicted about the Obama presidency and everything Mitt Romney said afterwards turned out to be true ... and was understated in condemning the viciously political conduct of foreign policy. Nasr confirms it, adds details, and his makes a soul wish to weep.

And yet ... and yet ... Nasr comes across as the most naive of sophisticates. Bing West, Max Boot, the entire Kagan clan and America's most accomplished diplomat, Henry Kissinger would not approve of the man. They all realize, despite being from different parties and different points of view within them, that Bismark was onto something when he said "Victories are won with blood and steel." and George Orwell even moreso when he wrote that "Good people sleep secure in their beds because of hard men willing to do violence on their behalf. Nasr's entire world view seems to be a flight from that reality.

War may sometimes be a sad necessity, he thinks, but I hesitate to guess what war he'd ever see as worth fighting to its conclusion, instead of as a demonstration project. I should rather listen to a full-throated colonialist than Nasr.

While quoting Arab and other autocrats is useful, assuming their worldview and policy prescriptions, those very same prescriptions that created al Qaeda and the far more viciously violent Baath. He craves the approval of these horrid wretches. Their insights and power are worth paying heed to, but he give them an unearned, certainly undeserved, moral force. Their world-view is the same that has plagued the region since Napoleon came - a consciousness of weakness and a determination to manipulate stronger Western powers to their ends. These are often clever men, but Nasr's approach to them lacks this hardness of such gimlet-eyed clarity.

On the other hand, Nasr also lacks Barak Obama's hatred for local defenders of civil society and decent government. Nasr is not such a fool as to confuse the often amoral approaches of a foreign policy based on the doctrine of realism with the elevation of an immoral foreign policy over everything but short-term domestic political considerations.

As I said, the book is incredibly depressing ... especially where it rings true. What a nightmare.

Chelsea Ursaner says

This book gets 5 stars for how informative and well written it is. That said, it bothered me immensely from start to finish.

First Nasr dedicates each chapter to a key country where America (more specifically, the Obama administration) failed in foreign policy: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel/Palestine... "Failed" here is my term as well as Nasr's. This portion of the book incensed my anger towards the president.

The person who wanted to "get Afghanistan right," and pursue a different foreign policy strategy from Bush's unilaterally militaristic approach disappeared once the campaign ended. Among its worst offenses, the administration essentially thwarted the state department's attempts at pursuing diplomacy (in particular, Richard Holbrooke) and failed to take advantage of the great opportunity that the Arab Spring presented to instill democratic structure. Obama's foreign policy strategy in the Middle East has been limited to overthrowing dictators and using drones to kill terrorists. Other than that, America has been trying to disengage from the region as much as possible.

Nasr argues that this is a mistake for three reasons. Three Middle Eastern "headaches" that we cannot disengage from: oil, Israel, and terrorism. The solution that we should have been pursuing all along but that is not lost(!) is economic engagement (trade), direct investment (putting money towards infrastructure rather than arms), and institution building (helping to build democratic governments in individual countries as well as helping to build a multilateral organization in the region). I like Hilary Clinton's quote from an ASEAN meeting in Vietnam regarding the South China sea... "All disputes should be settled through multi-lateral talks." That is progressive!

But then Nasr started to irritate me. The central problem, he went on to say, is that China is now the one doing what we should be doing in the region. "America has done all the fighting while China has done all the business." This is bad because it allows China to get a sphere of influence and basically challenges our world dominance. Example:

"What would be the upshot if America remained fully engaged in the Middle East? What would that mean for China's role in the region, and for our relations with China? We could protect the region from China's heavy hand and from illiberal institutions that it would promote and support. We could ensure our Asian allies access to stable energy supplies, and in the process limit China's ability to realize its broader strategic interests in Asia and globally."

The fact of the matter is, as Nasr points out multiple times, that China is building bridges while we are building up militaries. A Chinese sphere of influence may not be so worrisome (Thorium as an energy source??) and a diplomat of all people should see the potential good. If democracy is the great virtue I believe it is, it will prevail in China and beyond.

I agree with Nasr's ultimate conclusion that "China, more than counter terrorism and nuclear fear, should be the bedrock of America's Middle East strategy in the 21st century" – but I think his view of seeing them as mostly threatening and untrustworthy is awful for diplomacy.

Judie says

While Vali Nasr, doesn't put all the blame on President Barack Obama for what he sees as the decline of America's role in today's world, he does blame him for much of it. Born and raised in Iran, the dean of the Paul H. Nitze Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and former senior advisor to Ambassador Richard Holbrook, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Nasr was in a unique position to observe the workings of the Obama administration's foreign policy.

The chapters focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, the Arab Spring, the role of other nations, especially China, in the changing Middle East, the influence of other Arab and Moslem countries, and what America can do to regain credibility.

When he campaigned for office, Obama spoke about changing the policies of President George W. Bush and extricating the US from the Middle East wars begun during that administration. Unfortunately, President Obama chose to surround himself with "a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisors" who were more concerned about "how any action in Afghanistan or the Middle East would play on the nightly news" or how the Republicans would be able to use his actions against him.

Nasr claims that "America went into Iraq to build democracy, but left building an authoritarian state as an exit strategy....Obama was not really committed to democracy in the Middle East." That lack of a foreign policy, partially the result of Obama's inexperience in that area and of his over reliance on his close-knit, inexperienced group of advisors formed the core of his inability to resolve the issues in America's favor. They were used to working in a fast-pace campaign mode. Governing a country requires different skills. Obama also insisted on examining every detail personally, which not only slowed down the process for making decisions, it also lessened the information that could be used to make those decisions. In addition, when he did not like the options he was offered, instead of asking for more options, he chose one of them anyhow.

Leaders of the opposition of both Afghanistan and Pakistan sent messages that they wanted to talk to the US to find a solution to the war. The US refused to meet with them, preferring to use the military to achieve its aims.

When writing about Iran, Nasr states that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wanted to deal with the US. Unfortunately his tactics backfired. "He hoped his vitriol, denying the Holocaust, taunting Israel, and rallying resistance to America, would make him too important to ignore....He made himself a pariah." He wrote to Obama to congratulate him on his election in 2008. He received no response. He supported making a deal about the nuclear issue but got no credit for that.

To get Russia's support for sanctions against Iraq, Obama ignored the human rights abuses perpetrated by Russia.

It is necessary to win the support of the people in order for a government to be successful but the US provided money to help favored projects regardless of how they would help the population. For example, COIN (counterinsurgency) sent almost all its money into Helmand province which housed fewer than one percent of the population. In 2011, only six percent of Afghans had electricity but the US spent \$1 billion to provide electricity to parts of Kandahar.

In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, Holbrook and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton believed the United States should engage the people and use that relationship to achieve if not a peaceful at least a workable solution to the problems. For example, the State Department noted that the US went into Afghanistan to get the Taliban. When the group moved to Pakistan, the US continued the fight in Afghanistan. The Obama Administration chose, instead, to use a dual approach: diplomacy plus military might with the emphasis on the latter. It also excluded the State Department from many of the meetings relating to the Middle East and ignored its observations.

People in the are fear our military power because they think we use it recklessly and they can't defend themselves against it. They don't want to agree to plans they know won't work and put their nations at risk. They believe we will abandon them when push comes to shove, or even earlier, leaving them to deal with the mess we have made.

None of the issues that brought us to the Middle East have been resolved. Instead, China has taken advantage of the turmoil and has been gaining influence. It wants to extend its influence in the Middle East and maintain the oil and gas sources it desperately needs. Part of its operation is giving money to the countries for projects that the people can actually see, such as bridges, highways and rail routes, which makes China more appealing to them. China also has the ability to move some of the low-paying jobs which have resulted in low cost products throughout much of the world, including the US, to Arab countries. That would help resolve two problems: Unemployment and low incomes.

Another major problem underlies much of the turmoil in the Middle East: Sunni versus Shia. The sectarian feuds, many caused by minority-ruled governments, will not disappear without a lot of work and time. The US doesn't seem to want to expend either.

The Arab Spring was the result of a long history of "political repression, economic stagnation, and cultural and religious expression." Nasr writes that the US should return to diplomacy and economic engagement to help regain its preeminent place in the world as well as help bring democracy to other countries. We should "ensure regional stability and promote regional harmony." It worked before and could do so again.

As I write this review, Egypt has overthrown its democratically elected president after less than a year in office. The country's future is uncertain. The US is planning its exit from Afghanistan while terrorist attacks against the forces we support are ongoing. These issues or the possibility of them are discussed in the book. This well-written, well-documented book does an excellent job putting America's foreign policy and its results under a microscope and provides suggestions for improvement. It

supports many of the comments found in Kim Ghattas's recent book *THE SECRETARY* which discussed Hillary Clinton's years as Secretary of State.

I received my Early Reviewers copy from LibraryThing.

Doubleday Books says

"In *The Dispensable Nation*, Nasr delivers a devastating portrait of a first-term foreign policy that shunned the tough choices of real diplomacy, often descended into pettiness, and was controlled 'by a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisers.'... *The Dispensable Nation* constitutes important reading as John Kerry moves into his new job as secretary of state. It nails the drift away from the art of diplomacy — with its painful give-and-take — toward a U.S. foreign policy driven by the Pentagon, intelligence agencies and short-term political calculus. It holds the president to account for his zigzags from Kabul to Jerusalem....*The Dispensable Nation* is a brave book. Its core message is: Diplomacy is tough and carries a price, but the price is higher when it is abandoned."

—Roger Cohen, *New York Times*

"*The Dispensable Nation* is an indispensable book. Taking us into the secretive world of high-level American foreign policy, Vali Nasr shares astounding, previously unrevealed details about the Obama administration's dealings with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. But Nasr doesn't just spill secrets—he also charts a path forward, advancing an insightful prescription for how the United States can regain its lost influence. This provocative story is a must-read for anyone who cares about America's role in the world."

—Rajiv Chandrasekaran, author of *Little America* and *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*.

"An original, powerful, and provocative critique of American foreign policy under President Obama."

—George Packer, author of *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*

"Vali Nasr was in the room during key moments of the Obama administration's first two years as it faced some of its most important foreign policy challenges. His portrayal of strategic confusion inside Obama's White House is devastating and persuasive. Nasr writes with the dispassion of one of the United States' leading experts on the Middle East and South Asia and with the insider knowledge he gained as a senior adviser to Richard Holbrooke, the legendary diplomat. Nasr asserts that the Obama White House didn't really believe in diplomacy in its dealings with the Afghans and Pakistanis and he makes his case with great cogency and clarity in this indispensable book."

—Peter Bergen, author of *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for bin Laden, from 9/11 to Abbottabad*

"Vali Nasr is the George Kennan of U.S. policy in the Middle East. A renowned scholar but also a practitioner and insider who served two years in the Obama administration, Nasr delivers a sharp, sober, fast-paced and absolutely riveting critique of President Obama's policies in the Middle East and Afghanistan."

—Robert Kagan, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution and author of *The World America Made*

"The Dispensable Nation is an important wake-up call by a thoughtful, astute and deeply knowledgeable scholar and policymaker. Anyone interested in the Middle East, China, or the future of American power should read it immediately and think hard about its message."

—Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bert G. Kerstetter '66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and former Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State, 2009-2011

"An impressive tour d'horizon which includes a personally frank eulogy to Richard Holbrooke's failed efforts to shape U.S. policy in Afghanistan, revealing insights into White House vs. State Department collisions over U.S. strategy, and a sweeping review of the escalating geopolitical challenges the U.S. needs to address more intelligently in the Middle East, the Far East, and especially Iran. Gutsy, intriguing, and challenging."

—Zbigniew Brzezinski

"Vali Nasr is without peer in explaining how and why political order is crumbling across the Middle East, and how and why China may reap the spoils. Along the way, he lays out in never-before-told, granular detail why President Obama's first term was such a disappointment regarding foreign policy."

—Robert D. Kaplan, chief geopolitical analyst, Stratfor, and author of *The Revenge of Geography*

James Murphy says

Nasr has an axe to grind. That axe has compelled him to tell truths and analyze America's strategy in Asia and the Middle East as he sees it. The analysis is grim. By the time I'd finished his "Introduction" and "Prologue" I was already discouraged and reluctant to learn the bad news I knew was contained in the book's body. Early on it reads like a valentine to Hilary Clinton and the late Richard Holbrooke and a harsh critique of Barack Obama and his national security team which is opting out of heavy involvement in the Middle East in favor of a "pivot" to the east to counter the rising strategic challenge of China. When criticisms are this rabid they become polemic, and polemics are always suspect because an oppositional agenda underlies them.

Nation by nation Nasr analyzes the current strategic picture in the Middle East, with emphasis on those drawing most of the U. S.'s attention, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. The war winding down in Afghanistan

might be replaced by conflict America sees as necessary to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear-armed. Our deteriorating relationship with Pakistan will drive them into the welcoming arms of China which needs an Indian Ocean port on Pakistan's coast to support its energy interests in the Persian Gulf. Turkey's difficult position sitting astride the juncture of Europe and the Middle East is delicate as it tries to be influential in both.

The final chapter is about China and is the heart of the book in that East Asian concerns are steering American foreign policy in the Middle East. North America will be independent of Middle Eastern energy in a decade or two. In addition, America's trade with East Asia is ten times that of trade with the Middle East. So our relations with the Persian Gulf region have become less important, and so Obama's pivot. But our decreased interest and influence will create a vacuum into which China will rush, and Nasr's concerned that China's mercantilist spirit in regard to oil, which he considers similar to that of Germany in the years leading to World War I, will create tensions resulting in conflict if she tries to control the flow of energy through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. China's desire to control the latter is seen as perhaps the biggest problem. The United States and the West stand for free trade, for open economies and governments in a system developed in the early days of the Cold War as a countermeasure to Soviet pressures. China's position on a system she had no part in developing is unknown. The U. S. guarantees free access to trade routes, and confrontation looms in the South China Sea. In addition, Obama's strategy seems to be to ring China with points of containment. But in the past she's lashed out at those points which threatened her: Korea in 1950, India in 1962, the Soviet Union in Manchuria, 1969, and Vietnam in 1979. See? Grim. America wants to protect its Pacific hegemony. China wants to expand.

This a recent publication. I've had it for only a short while and read it quickly in order to have its immediacy. It's two-sided. The message on Middle Eastern policy is so negative that one longs for the debate one would get from the same material being presented in another format. The argument that abandoning the Middle East to China is more interesting.

Joseph Stieb says

This book's strengths are twofold. First, Nasr makes strongly defends the efficacy of diplomatic and economic engagement as a means of addressing foreign policy. He argues that both sides of the political aisle have neglected these aspects of foreign policy, preferring to either be disengaged or confrontational. Nasr shows that the US has relied too much on the military without also using diplomatic tools in places like Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan. His insightful criticism of the Obama Administration is that its foreign policy has been driven by domestic political priorities. These priorities include the desire to avoid looking weak (as Democrats are accused of being) by using American military might in places like Afghanistan and disengaging from Iraq on all fronts in order to placate American world and war-weariness. He rightfully accuses the US of simply not wanting to engage in the messy gray area of diplomacy. Of course, Nasr is a diplomat, so it's natural for him to hype the diplomatic corps at the expense of the military. He believes (and I agree) that the US must return to this leadership position in order to uphold the liberal international order. The problem in Nasr's mind is that the US hasn't developed a global and regional strategy that engages allies and employs military, diplomatic, and economic tools. His chapter about China and the Middle East shows China's increasing involvement there and how the US would be unwise to hand leadership of this region to such a Machiavellian country. Still, I'm not so sure that China really wants to follow our footsteps into this volatile region. In this chapter, he successfully contends that the US can't truly pivot away from the Middle East towards China because China is currently pivoting to the Middle East. These are inseparable theaters.

The second strength of the book derives from Nasr's incredible understanding of the ethnic politics of the Middle East. No one I know is better equipped to help people navigate the labyrinthine and shifting alliances and rivalries between these groups. He insightfully argues that the Arab Spring is partially an ethnic rebalancing act, as disempowered majority groups (Sunni in Syria, Shia in Bahrain) attempt to seize power from empowered minorities (Alawites, Sunnis).

Unfortunately, there are several weaknesses that detract from the book. First, I know that he was Richard Holbrooke's right hand man, but Nasr goes too far in portraying Holbrooke as the diplomatic equivalent of Jesus and Michael Jordan. He also praises Hillary so much it makes me think he's positioning himself for a position in her Cabinet after 2016. His portrayal of the Obama Administration as divided by warmongering generals, myopic, ignorant, and strangely unnamed political aides, and far-sighted and unfairly ignored diplomats is too simplistic and convenient. For instance, he gives Robert Gates no credit for his consistent caution about the use of force and his advocacy of diplomatic engagement. Second, too many of his analyses focus solely on one variable. He accuses Obama of increasing troops levels in Afghanistan for domestic political reasons, but many other sources show that Obama stepped up US involvement in Afghanistan because of the devolving security situation there. As another example, he argues that the US tried COIN in Vietnam but it was a disaster. Few historians of that war would say that the United States actually tried a counterinsurgency strategy that looked anything like the strategy of FM 3-24 as their main strategy. Third, he tends to paraphrase or "fake quote" the arguments and perspectives of those with whom he disagrees, but this too often leads him to straw man other people's claims to make his argument look better.

Finally, he too often portrays other nations as sage, realistic foreign policy actors and the US as naive, short-sighted, and ignorant of realities in the region. He does not criticize the fantasies of countries like Pakistan, which somehow sees Pashtun irredentism as a bigger threat than the Frankenstein monster known as the TTP it has bred in its own backyard, but rather criticizes the US for not acting in accordance with those fantasies. After all, it's the TTP that has killed 35,000 Pakistanis since 2001, not American drone strikes. He narrates one story in which Hillary faced an audience of Pakistani women. Hillary expected to talk about women's rights, but she was grilled ruthlessly about drones. Nasr concludes that a foreign policy based on drones (which no one is really pushing) would be inappropriate. I counter that the US should not necessarily cater its actions to the collective delusions of foreign nations. This is a country in which women's rights are truly abysmal and definitely kill far more women than the few hundred Pakistanis killed by drones. This anecdote really shows the irrational focus this society has with drones, not that the US shouldn't use them to kill HVTs. Similarly, Iran may not be willing to give up their nuclear program even if it means economic ruin, but that does not mean Iran's obstinate behavior is rational. In my mind, part of diplomacy should be pressuring and arguing with other countries to give up their harmful fantasies.

Contrary to the assertions of realists and many neo-cons, Nasr shows that liberal diplomats can also be hard-headed about American foreign policy and the world at large. Hopefully, American leadership will heed his argument that the US has recently neglected the art of diplomacy. He repeatedly shows that diplomacy gets results. He advocates a search for common ground with contentious countries like Iran and Pakistan that might work better than confrontation, although I'm not sure that letting Iran out from sanctions would be a good idea. Nevertheless, I wouldn't mind if we someday see him as the chief of Foggy Bottom.

256 pages.

Dr Noor Saleh says

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Graham Mcmillan says

A depressing look at America's foreign policy. The author was unnecessarily haughty, supercilious, and "I know it all, Obama knows nothing" in tone. Fact is, there are few good choices out there, but the author fails to take this nuanced approach, choosing instead to castigate the current administration at e Rey turn. Though they are undoubtedly deserving of some criticism, this. Approach was more dismal than helpful.

Kerry says

Well-written and clear, but it's true what other reviewers say about Nasr having an agenda. However, some of the comments offer a black-and-white view of the big picture (Obama = good, can do no wrong/ Hillary Clinton = bad, did a lot of wrong), while Nasr does something of the opposite, placing himself in Clinton's camp and against Obama's decisions. I like Obama, but that doesn't mean he doesn't deserve criticism in areas where he was weak, like diplomacy and contributing to the rise of military power rather than the power of talk and negotiation. Likewise, Hillary Clinton had some drawbacks but was still a highly qualified female candidate for president, but we will now never know what she could have done wrong or right.

Natalie says

Well I wasn't really sure what to rate this book, so I'm going with 2.5. Mr Nasr makes a lot of interesting points (mostly in the China chapter), but I think some of the woulda/coulda/shoulda in the previous chapters was a bit off-base and overly simplistic. He was a bit repetitive as well - I feel like he could have gotten this book down to 185 pages. But, overall, there are definitely some stats and points that are worth keeping in

mind and can serve as a foundation for future policy

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

"The Dispensable Nation" is a grim look at American foreign policy and where the author thinks that it is going. Nasr worked in the White House with Hillary Clinton as the Secretary of State and Richard Holbrooke, a much renowned foreign policy mind also in the State Department. Nasr has an axe to grind of sorts with Obama's foreign policy and for the most part, he makes a very good case throughout the book.

It was a fascinating read. It is easy to criticize things like foreign policy, which has so many moving parts and things that must be considered, from the outside. I am always more fascinated by those that have been on the front lines of making big decisions to see how they felt about the decisions that were made.

The book is broken down into different topical sections. I thought this worked really well for the subject matter in order not to overwhelm the reader. Although this book is filled with a lot of criticism for what the author sees as failings, I liked that the author also included other ways forward that should be considered by those that make and carry out foreign policy. I like books that stick with me long after the last page. This book gave me a lot to think about. It's a great read for those that have a keen interest in the difficult things that foreign policy makers face every day!

Antony says

This one is about 5 years old, but as an insider's account by a Middle East scholar who joined the Obama Administration it contains insights on every page. With the passage of time it is interesting to see what he got right (Iraq) and what he got wrong (Turkey). It's very hard to predict the future! This book is extremely critical of the Obama Presidency; but would Professor Nasr's (greater entanglement) prescriptions have made the Middle East any safer? Also very hard to say.

Oliver says

I saw Jon Stewart interview Vali Nasr on the Daily Show when *The Dispensable Nation* was first released, and put it on my to-read list. Non-fiction, especially political non-fiction, is pretty time-sensitive, but I unfortunately did not get around to picking this up until two years later. Oh well, it can't be helped. So, here it goes:

Nasr worked as senior adviser for Richard Holbrooke, who was a highly-regarded diplomat named Obama's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in early 2009, until Holbrooke's untimely death in 2010. After two years of working in the Obama administration trying to address current issues in the Middle East, and largely being ignored in favor of advisers whose primary concern "was how any action in Afghanistan or the Middle East would play on the nightly news," Nasr sets out to expose the Obama administration's foreign policy failures (both short-term and long-term), and explain what he thinks should be the country's top priorities abroad.

The first few chapters are broken up by country—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq— and how time and

again the government's stubbornness and overconfidence in military tactics have failed in each region. To me, most of his criticism seems fair —using pressure, such as sanctions, to bring about a diplomatic resolution, instead of just being the goal, makes sense— but I'm not well-versed in foreign policy or Middle Eastern sectarian disputes, and it couldn't say for sure if Nasr's answers are too simple and/or idealistic (there were a couple parts that felt that way). In an area stricken by war fueled by religious extremism, border disputes, and economic issues, is it fair to hold up our successes in democratizing Latin America and Europe as proof of soft forces' applicability in West Asia?

There were also a few things that seemed contradictory, like when Nasr states, "When the Obama administration came to power, there was a genuine sense that Pakistan was on the edge of national collapse. That is much less the case today. ...The business community and affluent middle classes started to write off America," but then two pages later, explains that "the country suffers from severe electricity shortages... factories shut down... and in sweltering summer heat tempers flare in the form of protests, riots, and street clashes. What is happening with electricity will happen with water tomorrow. ...Urban violence involving gangs and ethnic mafias is on the rise... the gap between the rich and poor is widening."

At times he sounds "know-it-all," and a bit condescending (e.g. "For every dollar we gave Pakistan in aid, we spent twenty on Afghanistan... It seems we had no problem spending money, just not on things that would actually bring about change and serve our interest"), but if his team's opinion was as ignored as he makes it out to have been, then I understand if Nasr is more than a little bitter.

He criticizes Obama's advisers for perpetuating "false assumptions" until they "take on the quality of self-evident truths," but he is no stranger to speculation either, as in the case with his explanation for Iran's desire to be a nuclear power (I'm not saying his argument doesn't seem plausible, just that he presents it as a fact, when, really, I'm pretty sure that no Iranian politician has ever come right out and said they want nuclear capability so that "Iran will not have to make peace with America, compromise on its ideology, and come in from the cold to avert war or isolation.").

Thankfully, his dissimilitude isn't limited to just Obama (critics start to lose their credibility when there opposition is so polar that an ulterior motive becomes a possibility); he places a good amount of blame on the Bush Administration, and at one point even outlines the policy failures of Iran's then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The most interesting chapters, however, are the later ones, in particular "The China Challenge," where Nasr explains why we shouldn't remove ourselves from the Middle East. For starters, he points out that even if we do manage "getting off Middle Eastern oil," our absence in the area will allow China to have too much influence, which would be bad not just for us, but all our allies, and probably even the Middle Eastern countries partnering up with China. And speaking of "going green," Nasr asserts this goal as a "far-fetched, long-run answer to an immediate strategic problem," and even though he does include a single sentence warning that "the environmental costs of getting to [domestic oil] are as yet not full known," he does seem to be in favor of slant drilling and fracking. I know that's not what the book is about, but what's up with that?

Anyway, the takeaway, as John Steward put it in his interview with Nasr, is "less bombing, less invading, less punishment, more... nicer." Although that omits the part about China taking over the world in the near-future, it otherwise is a decent summary.

Summer says

The author is obviously a Clinton supporter based on the numerous praises. This book is also quite repetitive. However it is well written and an engaging read.
