In less than a year, the 44th president of the United States will take the oath of office. He or she will inherit a foreign policy that is in tatters. Osama bin Laden remains at large. The occupation of Iraq is a disaster, with few good options, whether or not American troops leave soon, slowly, or stay. A resurgent Taliban threatens a weak regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan may implode at any moment. Iran seems intent on building a nuclear arsenal. Israelis and Palestinians are no closer to peace than they were at the beginning of the decade. Russia is recalcitrant, China is on the march—and American credibility in the world has never been lower.

What's the new president to do? Madeleine Albright is uniquely qualified to provide some answers. Former ambassador to the United Nations and U.S. Secretary of State under President Clinton, Albright has a reputation for competence and candor. In Memo to the President Elect, she surveys the world's trouble spots and the national security tools available to the commander-in-chief, in order to identify the "right jumping off point among many possibilities." Albright thinks herself "naturally upbeat," but she believes that remedying the damage to the well-being and good name of the United States is a "Herculean task." Daunted by it herself, perhaps, she flies "above the thundering abyss" in Memo to the President Elect, delivering a blunt critique of past policies—but few specific suggestions to address the problems of the twenty-first century.

One thought animates all of Albright's advice: Be Not Bush. Rehearsing a by-now familiar refrain, with steam billowing from her laptop, Albright lambasts Bush for misreading America and the world. For seven years, she writes, American foreign policy has strayed far "from the broad avenues of common sense." Even if the world is not nearly as flat as Thomas
Friedman thinks it is, globalization puts a premium on consultation. Nonetheless, Bush did not listen, let alone seek consensus, before acting. Establishing a low threshold for the use of force, his invasion of Iraq "violated every principle of wise decision-making"—and may have encouraged several countries to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The president refused to deal with North Korea, "for no better reason than that Clinton had done it." Bush ignored Latin America until mid-way into his second term. His record on the detention, rendition, and torture of terrorist suspects, his allergy to treaties, and the appointment of John Bolton, who is contemptuous of international law, did not serve the interests of the United States. His unilateral plan to transform the Middle East "reduced an imperfect security structure to rubble."

Inheriting "a peck of troubles," the new president will have "no power over the heavens and little enough here below." Reacting perhaps to Bush's arrogant interventionism, Albright endorses a more cautious foreign policy for the United States. Consider, for example, her recommendations for dealing with Russia. Dismissing as unrealistic the expectation that with "help and hugs," the United States could turn Russia into a democracy, Albright fears that Vladimir Putin and his successors will use their oil and gas reserves—and their veto on the U.N. Security Council—to return to superpower status and etch onto Europe a new Iron Curtain, separating West from East. The new president should condemn these trends and look for "appropriate ways" to support advocates of democracy and human rights inside Russia. But he or she must recognize "that there will be limits to what we can effectively do." With reluctance, Albright concludes that the United States should give the Russians time and let them be Russians, working out their own internal problems in their own ways.

Albright seems a bit tentative as well on the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Noting that the United States lost influence when Bush disengaged from the peace process, she
wants the new president to get both sides talking to one another again. But the prospects seem dim. Israelis, she writes, "have lost any gut sense" about how to do it—and a substantial majority of Arabs "do not accept Israel’s moral legitimacy nor do they agree that a fair way can be found" for Jews and Muslims to co-exist.

Without much confidence, Albright advises the new president to "climb on the merry-go-round." One option, she indicates, involves re-visiting the 2002 proposal by the Saudis which pledged normal relations in exchange for a return to pre-1967 (with the possibility of isolating Hamas). If this option seems a non-starter—and it does—Albright wonders about encouraging talks between Israel and Syria, which might push Iran to the sidelines and weaken Hezbollah.

The plan, she admits, is unlikely to work because Bashir Assad will sign no agreement until and unless the Palestinians are ready to sign. And so, Albright falls back on a proposal "that may be less crazy than it sounds"—a dialogue, co-sponsored by the United States, "uncensored and with ample time for questions and rebuttal," on the dimensions of truth in the Middle East. Such a forum could "put hate, incompetence, and bigotry under the spotlight" and give a public platform to "those who are fed up, and still believe there is a better way"

Albright knows it's a long shot, as long as the region is molded by power politics. But when the think tank is running close to empty, memos to the president-elect get filled with the stuff that dreams are made of.

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