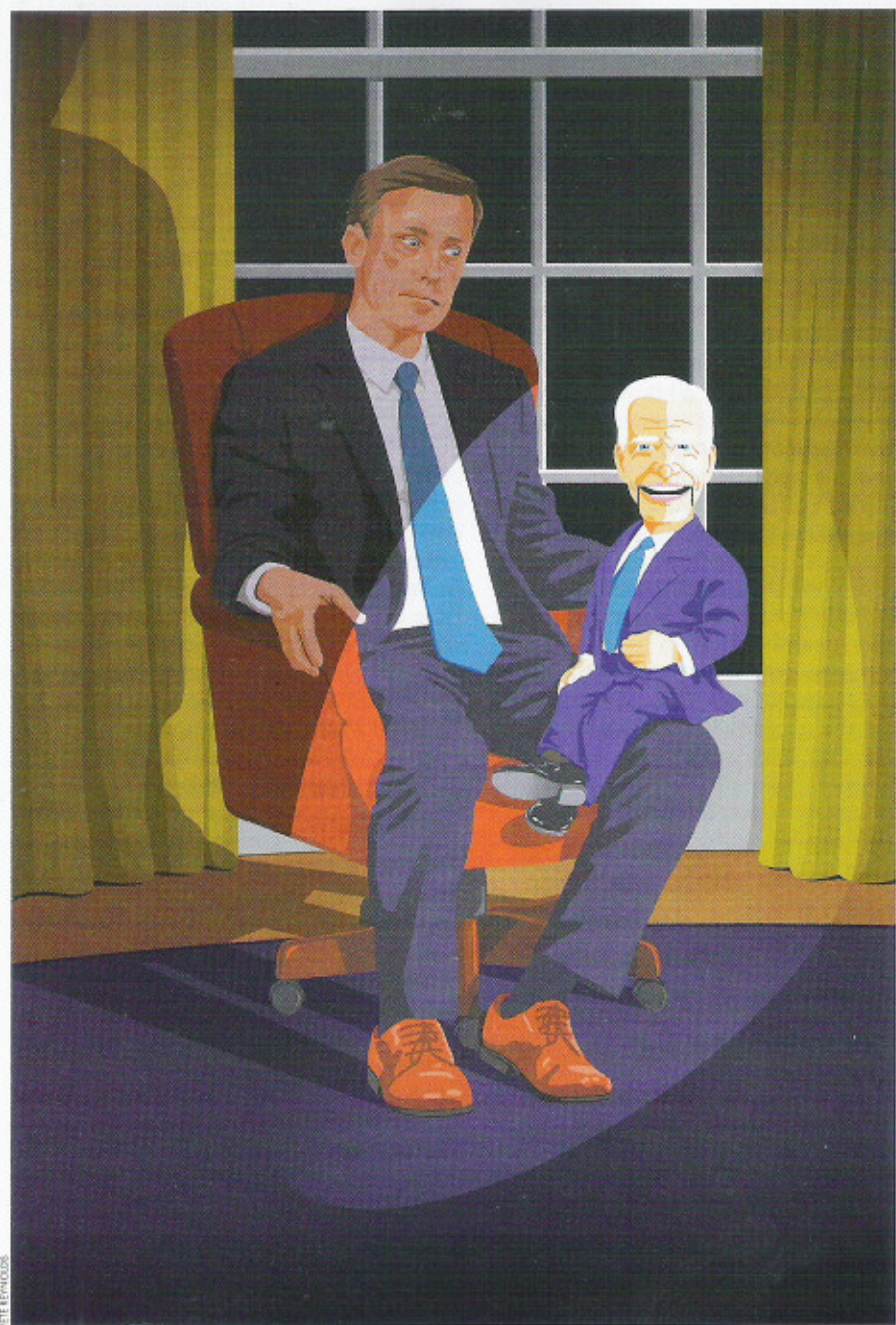


# BOOKS & ARTS



## President Jake

David J. Garrow examines a carefully researched new account that argues Biden is POTUS in name only

### **The Internationalists: The Fight to Restore American Foreign Policy After Trump**

Alexander Ward  
Portfolio, pp. 368, \$32

If you're one of the many people worried that US foreign policy is in the hands of a visibly declining eighty-one year-old president, Alexander Ward's account of the Biden administration's first two years in office may — or may not — make you feel better, for he leaves readers with little doubt as to who is actually the executive branch's most influential decision-maker: forty-seven year-old national security advisor Jake Sullivan.

Ward might deny any such authorial intent, but time and again he shows his hand, as when he invokes "Sullivan's first two years at the helm alongside Biden." Secretary of state Antony Blinken is of course close on Sullivan's heels, but Ward's thoroughly reported book, along with Chris Whipple's similar tome from early 2023, *The Fight of His Life*, both remind anyone tempted to forget that the calamitous August 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan remains the defining event of Joe Biden's first term in the White House.

Biden's insistence on withdrawing all US forces and supporting contractors from Afghanistan took place over the objections of all the relevant uniformed military commanders. Ward reports that Biden had made



up his mind on that course of action back in 2009, following a trip there early in his eight-year tenure as Barack Obama's vice president. Ward adds that both Sullivan and Blinken "were disillusioned" that Obama failed to follow through on his own desire to abandon Afghanistan, and two months after assuming the presidency in January 2021 Biden publicly proclaimed that "we will leave" and promised that "we're going to do it in a safe and orderly way." He reiterated that commitment in mid-April, insisting that "we will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it responsibly, deliberately and safely." As Ward reminds readers, "the last thing anyone wanted was a rushed American exit that echoed the scenes of Saigon in Vietnam thirty years earlier" when a lone CIA officer hustled people into a helicopter hovering over the roof of the US embassy.

Throughout spring 2021, uniformed American commanders "advocated for an indefinite military presence" of at least 2,500 troops, with Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Mark A. Milley presciently warning Biden that "withdrawing American forces would make it easy for the Taliban to retake the country" and that if that indeed did come to pass, Afghan "women's rights 'will go back to the Stone Age.'"

Milley was far from the only well-informed observer who envisioned what could happen. In May former US ambassador Ronald Neumann warned publicly of the danger of a rapid Taliban advance once US forces retreated: "If multiple cities fall the game may be over, and a rapid unraveling of the Afghan army and the Kabul leadership becomes a possibility." Perhaps even more essential to the Afghan forces than US troops were the US contractors who maintained Afghan equipment, especially its air force, but Biden's withdrawal order covered them as well. Once US soldiers began pulling back to Kabul from important bases, so did the contractors. Former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel noted that "the contractors would've stayed if they hadn't been told they had to leave" and emphasized to Whipple how "in that sense, we self-destructed our ally."

By August, the rout was underway, with the husk of American troops and a handful of remaining diplomats all huddled at Kabul's large international airport. Ward writes that for Biden, "the withdrawal from Afghanistan ... was threatening to be the noose around his presidency," and as hurriedly organized evacuation flights departed from the increasingly beleaguered airfield, it became obvious to the entire world "how unprepared the United States was for the advance of the Taliban and the extraction of vulnerable Afghan allies." Then, as a modest number of US troops struggled to maintain control of the surging crowds hoping to make it into the airport and onto a departing plane, a suicide

bomber struck just outside the gates, killing not only scores of desperate Afghans but thirteen US service members.

That news left Biden profoundly shaken: "The worst that can happen has happened." Whipple observes that Biden "appeared dazed, almost shellshocked," adding that "both the decision to withdraw and its flawed execution belonged to him." Ward similarly concludes that the debatable merits of that decision "would pale in comparison to the scenes of large-scale human suffering in Kabul." That Biden "had ended the war wouldn't be his legacy. How he ended the war would."

On August 29, the coffins containing the remains of those thirteen US heroes arrived at Dover Air Force Base, where both their survivors and the president somberly greeted them. Three of the families were infuriated at Biden, with one relative yelling, "You can't fuck up as bad as he did and say you're sorry. This didn't need to happen." Another screamed within Biden's earshot, "I hope you burn in hell." Former defense secretary and CIA director Leon Panetta, a Democrat, admitted to Whipple that "I refuse to believe that we couldn't have done this in a better way" and Whipple's own conclusion is almost undebatable: "The Afghanistan withdrawal was a whole-of-government failure; everyone got nearly everything wrong."

But within Biden's White House, literally no one was willing to acknowledge as much. "There was never any serious reckoning inside the administration," Ward reports, and "no one offered to resign in large part because the president didn't believe anyone had made a mistake," including himself. "They all knew their reputations would take a huge hit," Ward adds, and for Sullivan it was "the greatest failure of his professional career," but their utter inability to muster up even a shred of self-criticism reached its unbelievable apogee a few months later when

Sullivan publicly declared that "I believe, fundamentally, that the United States is in a better strategic position than the day we took office" eleven months earlier.

Such self-regard was all but delusional, yet Biden's inner circle knew, as Ward notes, that "the press... would eventually move on" from the awful tragedy of Kabul, which of course proved true: coming up on three years later, US press coverage of Afghanistan and the millions of Afghans who had hoped to live far better lives free of a misogynistic religious cult is virtually nonexistent.

Biden had entered office thinking that "competing with China would be the defining challenge" of his presidency, and Sullivan envisioned creating a "foreign policy for the middle class" that "prioritized the domestic elements of foreign policy." That was admittedly an electoral political strategy, not a vision of how best to steer world affairs, and by late 2021 growing evidence of Russian military plans to invade Ukraine threatened a second crisis that would divert US attention from China.

Back in 2014, when Vladimir Putin's nationalist dictatorship seized Crimea and eastern portions of the Donbas from Ukraine, "the Obama administration did little in response," Ward reminds readers. Vice President Biden had sought more, and during his eight vice-presidential years he made six visits to the fledgling democracy. In December 2021 Sullivan publicly warned that "things we did not do in 2014 we are prepared to do now." As 2022 dawned, Ward notes that it was clear that "the Obama-era modus operandi of risk aversion was gone."

Ward opines that the new Ukraine crisis "was the Obama cohort's chance at redemption," yet as Whipple earlier reported, Biden himself "was preoccupied with the possibility that Putin might use a nuclear weapon." Ward fully concurs, quoting Biden as saying, "We don't want World War Three." His administration believed that "war with Russia had to be avoided at all costs," yet why surrendering Ukraine — and potentially other nations, such as highly vulnerable Moldova — to Putin's rampant, Nazi-like aggression would be preferable to a nuclear faceoff appears never to have been debated.

Purposeful leaking of detailed US intelligence exposed Russia's invasion plans, but come early morning on February 24, Russian forces nonetheless streamed into Ukraine from multiple directions, highlighting the United States's "inability to stop a war" that everyone other than the unduly hopeful Ukrainian leadership had clearly seen coming.

Ward asserts, somewhat puzzlingly, that the Biden administration wishfully believed that no matter how military events played out, "the US-led resistance and world order



The forger



wins. Democracy wins. Russia and Putin's brand of authoritarianism, if not Putin himself, loses." If taken at face value, that attitude evinced no more concern for millions of brave Ukrainians than had the Biden mind-set six months earlier for legions of desperate Afghans. Though Ukrainian courage and skill halted and defeated the Russian advance on Kyiv, within weeks it was clear that the Russo-Ukrainian war would endure for many months and most likely years.

Ward reports that in late March 2022, General Milley advised Biden, "You have to answer the question of why this war should matter to the American people and what the war is about." "OK, what is it about?" Biden asked. Ward gives no indication whether that reply was the response of a Socratic questioner or an earnest dunderhead. Preserving world order, Milley answered. "That's good," a Biden aide responded. "I'll put that in there."

Some months later, Biden would make the decision to visit Kyiv in person, an unprecedented appearance by a sitting US president in an active war zone, and US funds and material would go a very long way towards sustaining Ukraine's defensive military successes throughout 2022 and 2023.

But as the duration and sufficiency of US military support for Ukraine came into question during the early weeks of 2024, the issue of whether Biden could successfully compromise with congressional Republicans to keep that necessary support flowing became existentially acute. Ward accurately poses the fundamental question that remains: "Ukraine would determine the president's legacy. Would he be remembered for the disastrous withdrawal from Kabul," or instead for successfully preserving the sovereignty of a vibrant European democracy from Hitlerian aggression?

Like almost all contemporaneously reported books of its genre, *The Internationalists* inescapably suffers from how much of its narrative depends on background sourcing, where Ward is unable to attribute quotations by name, but only to a "senior administration official" or someone "familiar with" Jake Sullivan's thinking. Whipple, in *The Fight of His Life*, had somewhat greater success in getting Biden officials to speak on the record, but influential yet highly press-averse figures such as defense secretary Lloyd Austin are always eclipsed in such instant histories.

A decade ago, former US defense secretary Robert M. Gates famously wrote of Biden, "I think he has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades." Biden's abandonment of Afghanistan reinforced that historical verdict; only Ukraine's future will decide whether that judgment is yet further buttressed or decisively contradicted.

# Not so black and white

Adrian Nguyen

## The End of Race Politics

Coleman Hughes  
Penguin, pp. 256, \$30

Claudine Gay would have you believe that her resignation as president of Harvard University was because of her identity. The scandal, in her and her allies' eyes, was that — as she wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed — she was "a Black woman selected to lead a storied institution." Never mind that her allies wouldn't say the same if black academics they don't like, like Thomas Sowell or John McWhorter, were involved in a similar scandal; their lens is always a racial one.

But the colorblind response would throw all this aside. Colorblindness — as Coleman Hughes writes in his new book, *The End of Race Politics* — is simply the idea that identity and ethnicity, as assessed by the color of someone's skin, should not be used to judge either an individual's actions or how he should be treated. Hughes defines colorblindness as "consciously disregarding race as a reason to treat individuals differently and as a category on which to base public policy." It is the belief that merit is appropriately used to determine many norms in society and that race is irrelevant in assessing fairness.

In this view, Claudine Gay wasn't forced to resign because she was a black woman, but because she was a serial plagiarist. Hughes argues that even some of the most racially sensitive episodes of the past few years are better understood outside of the context of race, such as the death of George Floyd. It was a heinous example of police violence, but not uniquely so. The fatal choking of Tony Timpa, a white man in a mental health crisis, in 2016 was just as awful, but received almost no public or media attention.

Hughes has become one of the youngest and most vocal advocates for colorblindness and has sparked sharp controversy because of it. His 2023 TED Talk on the topic was suppressed by the organization after TED's staff was outraged by his arguments, and afterwards he defended himself by debating *New York Times* columnist Janelle Bouie, who has repeatedly called Hughes part of a "cotton industry" of non-white commentators who deny that America is structurally racist.

*The End of Race Politics* expands on the arguments Hughes has made for several years, providing a detailed look at the history and implications of colorblindness. However, it's questionable how effective this will be at persuading those who don't already agree with his worldview.

Hughes begins the book, "I always find race boring." In his view, colorblindness should be the default liberal value, and we shouldn't care much for the concept of "race," particularly given how amorphous it is in contemporary, mixed-race societies. He argues that the chief use of "race" seems to be by loud leftist advocates — whom he labels "neoracists" — trying to claim victimhood and unearned higher status in our elite institutions. It was seeing this at his alma mater Columbia University that he "became convinced that the new race obsession that brands itself 'anti-racist' is the opposite."

The book's most important chapter addresses the history of "colorblindness"; he argues that the idea was pushed by radical activists during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than being a recent phenomenon pushed by conservatives. He describes the work of Wendell Phillips — an abolition-

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ist who served as a member of the American Anti-Slavery Alliance and who believed that governments should be colorblind, citing a speech where he proposed that race should be eliminated from American politics. *The End of Race Politics* also attempts to push back against the historical revisionism of opponents of the idea that race was core to *Brown v. Board of Education*, or that the Civil Rights movement was driven by a racial viewpoint, when its aims were to create a colorblind legal system.

The history is rich and interesting, but Hughes is less persuasive in his proposed remedies to racism, which strike even the sympathetic reader as quite tame. One of Hughes's requests is to remove racial slurs from our vocabulary, which would seem impossible in a world where vulgar humor, regardless of race, is so rewarded and enjoyed. He can also be vague in his solutions, like suggesting institutions make their processes as blind as possible without providing an example of what had actually worked to support his claims. It's convincing to those who agree with Hughes already, but if you think racial diversity is an inherently valuable end, worth pushing for through hiring systems, *The End of Race Politics* is unlikely to change your mind.

Though Hughes makes similar arguments to other colorblind writers like Thom-