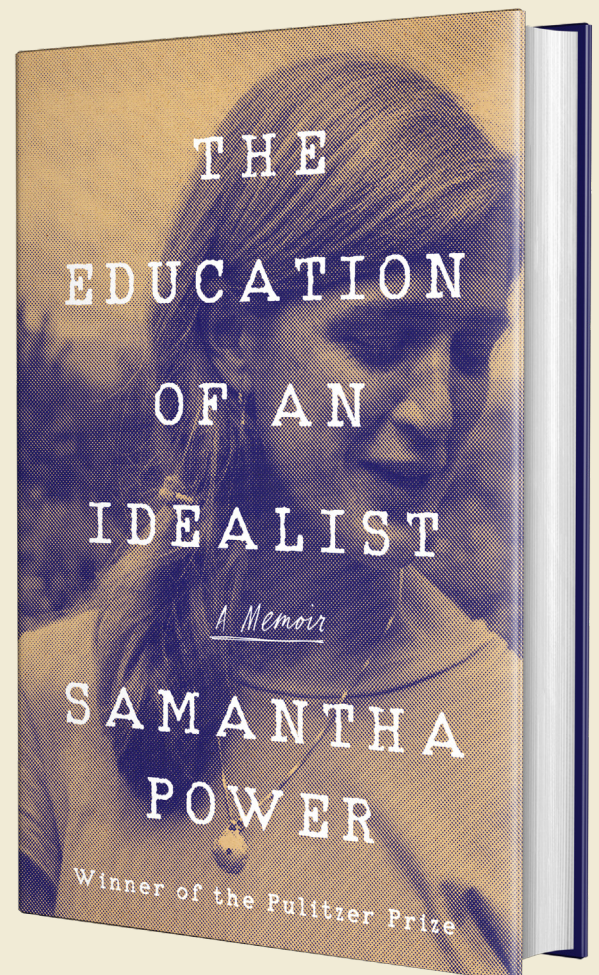


The Education of an Idealist

By Samantha Power

READING GROUP GUIDE | QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Power's childhood in Ireland and experience becoming an immigrant to the United States at a young age end up shaping her world view? How do you think this background influenced her choices later in life and the policies she decided to focus on while working in government?
2. What did Power learn from her time as a war correspondent in the Balkans? Once she returned to the US, how did her background as a journalist and what she witnessed in Bosnia end up impacting her approach to advocacy and diplomacy?
3. Power won the Pulitzer Prize for her book *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, which chronicled the US government's responses to genocide during the twentieth century. The book examined why government officials had often done very little to stop major genocides, despite the oft-repeated mantra of "never again" that became commonplace in the US after the horrors of the Holocaust. Then-Senator Barack Obama reached out after reading the book, and Power ultimately worked for him in the Senate, during his presidential run, and throughout his presidency. How were Power's experiences making policy at the White House and the UN influenced by her previous views as an activist and critic of US foreign policy? How did she come to reconcile these 'outsider' and 'insider' perspectives, and what most challenged her in doing so?
4. Power explores the role of gender throughout *The Education of an Idealist*, from how it influenced her work as a reporter and diplomat to her experiences in the male-dominated world of foreign policy. She also discusses how becoming a mother while serving in all-consuming national security roles changed her personal and professional outlook. What do you think about the way Power portrays issues of gender, sexism, and female empowerment? Does what she describes remind you of anything in your own experience?
5. The idea of dignity is central to Power's worldview. How did it inform the positions she argued for at both the White House and the United Nations? To what extent do you agree with Power's argument that "dignity is an underestimated force in politics and geopolitics," and that it should be taken into greater consideration by those in-charge of national security decision-making?
6. What is the "toolbox" that Power describes as central to deterring atrocities and other human rights abuses, and what "tools" seem particularly important and impactful to you? What other tools are missing from the book that you think would make governments more effective at helping people who are facing potential dangers? What kind of "tools" do you have available to you to combat the injustice you see around you?



7. How did Power's life change once she became the US Ambassador to the UN? What crises erupted during her tenure and how do you think she—and the Obama administration—handled them? Was there more she should have done? Do you think she should have heeded the calls for her to resign in light of the Obama administration's inability to prevent mass atrocities in Syria?
8. As UN Ambassador, Power tried to bring a more human-focused, activist approach to the often buttoned-up world of foreign policy. What did you think of this strategy, and in what ways were her ambitions in this regard both fulfilled and tempered? Do "stories" and first-hand testimonials matter in politics and geopolitics? Do they matter day-to-day in your lives?
9. Power paints a complex picture of her relationship with Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin. On the one hand, they work together on certain key issues and develop what Power describes as "something resembling a genuine friendship." On the other, Churkin frequently lies on behalf of his government and helps implement Russian policies, many of which Power finds abhorrent and cruel. What do you think of Power's efforts to "compartmentalize" and forge a close relationship with someone who is also trying to impede many of her initiatives? How far should someone be willing to go in trying to find common ground with an adversary?
10. Power notes that as a government official, she always tried to avoid "admiring the problem"—i.e. she was careful only to offer ideas that she believed were constructive, realistic, and actionable. She says that when those who worked with her would fall into the trap of admiring the problem, she would handwrite on their memos, "If you were Obama, what would *you* do?" Thinking about some of the major issues Power details—responding to Syrian chemical weapons attacks, the Ebola crisis, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the potential for mass atrocities in Libya, the 2015 refugee crisis, and others—what do you think you would have done if you were the person with the ability to shape the US response?
11. Power writes about her efforts to visit all 192 other UN ambassadors. Why do you think she chose to do this, and what were some of the most memorable interactions from these meetings? Recall that one of the ambassadors tells her, "If America sneezes, people in my country catch a cold." How do you interpret this statement, and how does it make you think about how other countries view the role that America plays in the world?
12. After a successful campaign to stop the Russian government from rolling back LGBT rights at the UN, Power observes that "sometimes preventing a bad outcome is what passes for victory" in government. Elsewhere, Power recounts President Obama telling her that "Better is good, and better is actually a lot harder than worse." What do you make of these concepts? How are they related, and how would you apply them outside the world of foreign policy? Do you worry about incrementalism in light of the scale of the problems around you? If you believe that large sweeping change is necessary on some issue, how would you start trying to bring about that change?
13. What did you take away from Power's book about the meaning and power of idealism? Are you more or less idealistic after reading Power's story? What do Power's experiences suggest are the best strategies and approaches for individuals who consider themselves idealists and want to make a difference on a particular cause? How does one hold on to idealistic notions in the face of setbacks and horrible developments around the world?