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Book Review: Here, Right Matters: An American Story

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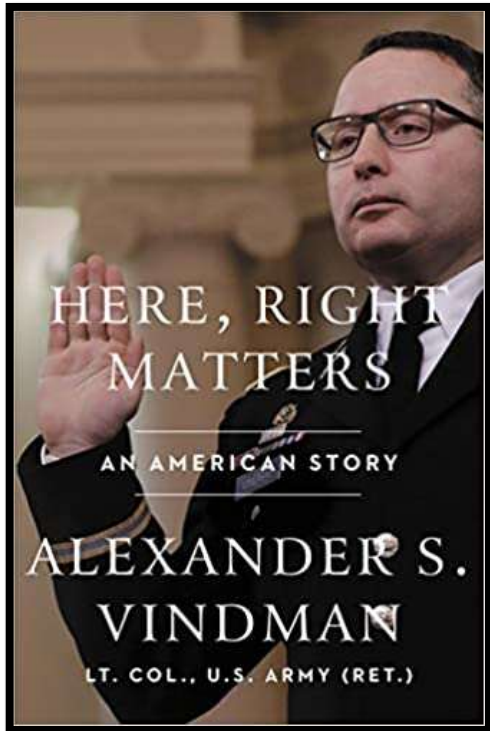
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Here, Right Matters: *An American Story*

Author: Alexander S. Vindman

Reviewer: Noreen Ohlrich, Project Staff Associate – Research Foundation for the State University of New York

Publisher: Harper (August 3, 2021)

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A few questions emerge when approaching a book written by someone as well-known as retired Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman. He did, after all, play a central role in the impeachment of former President Donald Trump. What does he have to say about that? What was it like to report the conversation exposing perhaps one of the greatest abuses of U.S. presidential power? Why did he do it considering various risks one can imagine? Indeed, this book is an American story that reveals the background behind perhaps one of the most blatant political dramas and executive office leadership disappointments of our time. Yet, it is more than that.

The title of the book suggests that Vindman's decision to expose the former President was an organic one. It perpetuated itself from a pure, profound homage to an American patriotism

encouraging people to do what is right in a country well-renowned to empower people to do just that. Per his testimony during Trump's impeachment hearings – *here, right matters*. Vindman further explains in this book:

... I didn't see it as going up against President Trump personally. I was carrying out my sworn duty...Another question I've been asked is how I knew so quickly and firmly what I had to do. Where did I get the moral compass and the courage to act so decisively? The answer to that question is really what this book is about (p.23).

This book contains 12 chapters, and an epilogue of leadership lessons learned followed by acknowledgments to those who inspired them. Vindman's "American story" evolves throughout these chapters through the telling of how his own American dream came to surface: belonging to a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in Brooklyn. Yet, this is not done through any cliché chronological narrative. The power behind his story-telling lies within his recognizable self-reflection, and approachable, yet palpable, senses of nostalgia conveyed to readers.

Chapter 1 introduces Vindman's telling of what happened the morning of Thursday, July 25, 2019 in one of the White House Situation Rooms. This is not a typical editorial recount of a controversial conversation that took place between Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine. The chapter does its due diligence by debriefing the reader about concerns regarding U.S. foreign policy in the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Yet, the reader is also given insight into what it is like to be in his shoes at that moment. This reviewer appreciated how this was accomplished – in a natural, conversational sort of way. Remarks like "I'd been in this room many times, but you don't stop getting a kick out of it" (p. 2) welcome the audience into his world. He seems to want us to sit down with him, make ourselves comfortable, and prepare us for the gravity of what is to come. This initial chapter may already give the reader a sense of how hard a fall Vindman took to do what is right and the complexities and inherent tragedy behind his story. One begins to take in the great heights Vindman reached in his career by the time he encountered the day that would change everything for him. The author appears very aware of this as he iterates his impressive background, and hard-earned successes. As a forty-four-year-old, he was already a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel "assigned to a position equivalent to that of a two-star general, three levels above [his] rank. Since July 2018, [he'd] been at the National Security Council, serving as the director for eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Russia" (p.2).

Chapters 2-3 divulge into Vindman's family background, and its influence on who he was to become. What struck this reviewer most about these compelling stories is the manner in which Vindman tells them. He tells us about his childhood with his twin brother in an "exclusive" Soviet sanatorium. Years later, these two brothers were to work in exclusive posts in offices across from one another in the White House. While his father came from a notably high rank in 1970s Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, he escaped to come to America with his sons and mother-in-law with the equivalent of only a few hundred dollars left in his pocket. It is here that leadership lessons begin to emerge as he recalls his familial inspirations and fatherly advice telling him to not be afraid to *start over... and keep starting over*. The details of how this came to be are compounded through Vindman's telling of a family history imbedded in the tumultuous timeline of foreign policy in the very area he would be in charge of later in life. His family witnessed Nazi invasions into southeast Europe and Jewish expulsions into the Ural Mountains. He talks about Operation Barbarossa and the Wehrmacht,

his grandfather's death as a soldier, and his grandmother's resulting escape from a train full of Ukrainian refugees with his father and his aunt when they were children. Memories about what his family told him about their very difficult, impoverished refugee life along the foothills outside the Volga River are given further substance in the way he draws in his own later life experiences with the region.

The ways in which these chapters connect the past with the present will prove to fascinate its audience as Vindman details his life growing up in 1980s Brooklyn. This reviewer was particularly moved by these stories; their potential to resonate well with others, like herself, who grew up in south Brooklyn amidst immigrant families in the Brighton Beach and Coney Island areas. Readers should pay close attention to the many glimpses Vindman's childhood and youth experiences give in answering the question that this book is really about: Where did he get the moral compass and the courage to act so decisively when he witnessed improper presidential conduct? You will find answers here that lead to more in the chapters to come - chapters that are riddled with anecdotes about constant reflection throughout his leadership development such as *committing to your passion(s)* and *not self-deterring*.

Chapter 4 helps us understand why and how the military ends up being Vindman's destiny - where he wants to be. This chapter proves to be yet another example of meaningful storytelling as it dovetails his professional clarity with meeting his future wife, Rachel. Chapter 5 (The Moral Compass) is when lessons about leadership - that later prove to have underscored the entire book - float more clearly to the surface. Vindman starts repeating more mantras he learns from the military, such as alerting oneself to both *the absence of the normal and the presence of the abnormal*, and how *navigation is everything*. Chapter 6 denotes lessons he learns from personal losses that lead to revelations about *knowing your role* and being cognizant of the strength and sustenance of family.

Chapters 8-10 take us to the pinnacle of Vindman's story, and his moral compass. It is here that we learn how he was warned that working for the White House National Security Council would prove to be the "...most dangerous and challenging environments..." (p. 127) to work in despite his multiple deployments and dangers he faced in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is here where Vindman expresses admissions to self-doubt, and even hubris as he talks about the Greek mythological story of Icarus - the dangers of being a leader who, at the height of a career, can risk getting burnt.

Certainly I'd risen high and fast, with growing confidence. There's no doubt, too, that at times in my life, my inclination against self-deterrence and my all-important trust in my gut have led me astray...But I'd matured - partly thanks to the lessons I'd learned from mistakes...I don't think the Icarus reference is apt. I didn't fall because I flew too close to the sun. I fell as a result of a midair collision with something I couldn't have seen coming in a million years... (pp. 128-129).

Once can understand why chapter 8 (entitled *Danger*) includes personal photographs of the author's life- from pictures of his childhood to one taken of him submitting his retirement request after experiencing blatant retaliation and mobbing from the Trump Whitehouse, and how that all trickled into ways that the military distanced themselves from Vindman as a result.

This book is highly recommended based on the author's gripping accounts of how his ordeal transfigured him into being a stronger leader and public servant in ways that he perhaps never imagined. His *American* story proves to inspire and can galvanize others to join in advocacies

to hold unethical leaders accountable for breaking their oaths meant to advance the interests of their people.

About the Reviewer



Noreen Ohlrich is a researcher and adult educator with over 10 years of experience developing programs that serve vulnerable populations. She earned her BA from the New York Institute of Technology, and MA from the University of Wales, UK before completing her EdD at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Noreen was awarded with distinction for her overseas doctoral research exploring the workforce integration experiences of migrant South-Asian women in Germany. A current affiliate of the SUNY Research Foundation, she now looks forward to furthering her research into teaching about human trauma and resilience on individual and societal levels.

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