The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s
Foreign-Policy Guru

May 5, 2016

By David Samuels

The New York Times Magazine

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>

NYTimes.com no longer supports Internet Explorer 9 or earlier. Please upgrade your browser. [LEARN MORE »](http://www.nytimes.com/content/help/site/ie9-support.html)

Picture him as a young man, standing on the waterfront in North Williamsburg, at a polling site, on Sept. 11, 2001, which was Election Day in New York City. He saw the planes hit the towers, an unforgettable moment of sheer disbelief followed by panic and shock and lasting horror, a scene that eerily reminded him, in the aftermath, of the cover of the Don DeLillo novel “Underworld.”

Everything changed that day. But the way it changed Ben Rhodes’s life is still unique, and perhaps not strictly believable, even as fiction. He was in the second year of the M.F.A. program at N.Y.U., writing short stories about losers in garden apartments and imagining that soon he would be published in literary magazines, acquire an agent and produce a novel by the time he turned 26. He saw the first tower go down, and after that he walked around for a while, until he ran into someone he knew, and they went back to her shared Williamsburg apartment and tried to find a television that worked, and when he came back outside, everyone was taking pictures of the towers in flames. He saw an Arab guy sobbing on the subway. “That image has always stayed with me,” he says. “Because I think he knew more than we did about what was going to happen.” Writing Frederick Barthelme knockoffs suddenly seemed like a waste of time.

“I immediately developed this idea that, you know, maybe I want to try to write about international affairs,” he explained. “In retrospect, I had no idea what that meant.” His mother’s closest friend growing up ran the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which then published Foreign Policy. He sent her a letter and included what would wind up being his only piece of published fiction, a short story that appeared in The Beloit Fiction Journal. It was titled “The Goldfish Smiles, You Smile Back.” The story still haunts him, he says, because “it foreshadowed my entire life.”

**It’s the day** of President Obama’s final State of the Union address, Jan. 12, and the news inside the White House is not good. Luckily, the reporters on the couch in the West Wing waiting room don’t know it yet. The cream of the crop are here this early p.m. for a private, off-the-record lunch with the president, who will preview his annual remarks to Congress over a meal that is reported to be among the best in the White House chef’s repertoire.

“Blitzer!” a man calls out. A small figure in a long navy cashmere overcoat turns around, in mock surprise.

 “You don’t write, you don’t call,” Wolf Blitzer, the CNN anchorman, parries.

“Well, you can call,” shoots back his former colleague Roland Martin. Their repartee thus concluded, they move on to the mutually fascinating subject of Washington traffic jams. “I used to have a 9:30 hit on CNN,” Martin reminisces. “The office was 8.2 miles from my home. It took me 45 minutes.” The CBS News anchor Scott Pelley tells a story about how members of the press destroyed the lawn during the Monica Lewinsky scandal and were told that they would be allowed back once the grass was replanted. The National Park Service replanted the grass outside the White House, but the journalists weren’t allowed back on the lawn.

Unnoticed by the reporters, Ben Rhodes walks through the room, a half-beat behind a woman in leopard-print heels. He is holding a phone to his ear, repeating his mantra: “I’m not important. You’re important.”

The Boy Wonder of the Obama White House is now 38. He heads downstairs to his windowless basement office, which is divided into two parts. In the front office, his assistant, Rumana Ahmed, and his deputy, Ned Price, are squeezed behind desks, which face a large television screen, from which CNN blares nonstop. Large pictures of Obama adorn the walls. Here is the president adjusting Rhodes’s tie; presenting his darling baby daughter, Ella, with a flower; and smiling wide while playing with Ella on a giant rug that says “E Pluribus Unum.”

For much of the past five weeks, Rhodes has been channeling the president’s consciousness into what was imagined as an optimistic, forward-looking final State of the Union. Now, from the flat screens, a challenge to that narrative arises: [Iran has seized two small boats containing 10 American sailors.](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/world/middleeast/iran-holds-us-navy-boats-crew.html) Rhodes found out about the Iranian action earlier that morning but was trying to keep it out of the news until after the president’s speech. “They can’t keep a secret for two hours,” Rhodes says, with a tone of mild exasperation at the break in message discipline.

As the deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, Rhodes writes the president’s speeches, plans his trips abroad and runs communications strategy across the White House, tasks that, taken individually, give little sense of the importance of his role. He is, according to the consensus of the two dozen current and former White House insiders I talked to, the single most influential voice shaping American foreign policy aside from Potus himself. The president and Rhodes communicate “regularly, several times a day,” according to Denis McDonough, Obama’s chief of staff, who is known for captaining a tight ship. “I see it throughout the day in person,” he says, adding that he is sure that in addition to the two to three hours that Rhodes might spend with Obama daily, the two men communicate remotely throughout the day via email and phone calls. Rhodes strategized and ran the successful Iran-deal messaging campaign, helped negotiate the opening of American relations with Cuba after a hiatus of more than 50 years and has been a co-writer of all of Obama’s major foreign-policy speeches. “Every day he does 12 jobs, and he does them better than the other people who have those jobs,” Terry Szuplat, the longest-tenured member of the National Security Council speechwriting corps, told me. On the largest and smallest questions alike, the voice in which America speaks to the world is that of Ben Rhodes.

Like Obama, Rhodes is a storyteller who uses a writer’s tools to advance an agenda that is packaged as politics but is often quite personal. He is adept at constructing overarching plotlines with heroes and villains, their conflicts and motivations supported by flurries of carefully chosen adjectives, quotations and leaks from named and unnamed senior officials. He is the master shaper and retailer of Obama’s foreign-policy narratives, at a time when the killer wave of social media has washed away the sand castles of the traditional press. His ability to navigate and shape this new environment makes him a more effective and powerful extension of the president’s will than any number of policy advisers or diplomats or spies. His lack of conventional real-world experience of the kind that normally precedes responsibility for the fate of nations — like military or diplomatic service, or even a master’s degree in international relations, rather than creative writing — is still startling.

Part of what accounts for Rhodes’s influence is his “mind meld” with the president. Nearly everyone I spoke to about Rhodes used the phrase “mind meld” verbatim, some with casual assurance and others in the hushed tones that are usually reserved for special insights. He doesn’t think for the president, but he knows what the president is thinking, which is a source of tremendous power. One day, when Rhodes and I were sitting in his boiler-room office, he confessed, with a touch of bafflement, “I don’t know anymore where I begin and Obama ends.”

Standing in his front office before the State of the Union, Rhodes quickly does the political math on the breaking Iran story. “Now they’ll show scary pictures of people praying to the supreme leader,” he predicts, looking at the screen. Three beats more, and his brain has spun a story line to stanch the bleeding. He turns to Price. “We’re resolving this, because we have relationships,” he says.

Price turns to his computer and begins tapping away at the administration’s well-cultivated network of officials, talking heads, columnists and newspaper reporters, web jockeys and outside advocates who can tweet at critics and tweak their stories backed up by quotations from “senior White House officials” and “spokespeople.” I watch the message bounce from Rhodes’s brain to Price’s keyboard to the three big briefing podiums — the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon — and across the Twitterverse, where it springs to life in dozens of insta-stories, which over the next five hours don formal dress for mainstream outlets. It’s a tutorial in the making of a digital news microclimate — a storm that is easy to mistake these days for a fact of nature, but whose author is sitting next to me right now.

Rhodes logs into his computer. “It’s the middle of the [expletive] night in Iran,” he grumbles. Price looks up from his keyboard to provide a messaging update: “Considering that they have 10 of our guys in custody, we’re doing O.K.”

With three hours to go until the president’s address to Congress, Rhodes grabs a big Gatorade and starts combing through the text of the State of the Union address. I peek over his shoulder, to get a sense of the meta-narrative that will shape dozens of thumb-suckers in the days and weeks to follow. One sentence reads: “But as we focus on destroying ISIL, over-the-top claims that this is World War III just play into their hands.” He retypes a word, then changes it back, before continuing with his edit. “Masses of fighters on the back of pickup trucks, twisted souls plotting in apartments or garages — they pose an enormous danger to civilians; they have to be stopped. But they do not threaten our national existence.”

Watching Rhodes work, I remember that he is still, chiefly, a writer, who is using a new set of tools — along with the traditional arts of narrative and spin — to create stories of great consequence on the biggest page imaginable. The narratives he frames, the voices of senior officials, the columnists and reporters whose work he skillfully shapes and ventriloquizes, and even the president’s own speeches and talking points, are the only dots of color in a much larger vision about who Americans are and where we are going that Rhodes and the president have been formulating together over the past seven years. When I asked Jon Favreau, Obama’s lead speechwriter in the 2008 campaign, and a close friend of Rhodes’s, whether he or Rhodes or the president had ever thought of their individual speeches and bits of policy making as part of some larger restructuring of the American narrative, he replied, “We saw that as our entire job.”

Having recently spent time working in Hollywood, I realize during our conversations that the role Rhodes plays in the White House bears less resemblance to any specific character on Beltway-insider TV shows like “The West Wing” or “House of Cards” than it does to the people who create those shows. And like most TV writers, Rhodes clearly prefers to imagine himself in the company of novelists.

 “What novel is this that you are living in now and will exit from in eight months and be like, ‘Oh, my God’?” I ask him.

“Who would be the author of this novel?” he asks.

“The one you are a character in now?”

“Don DeLillo, I think,” Rhodes answers. “I don’t know how you feel about Don DeLillo.”

“I love Don DeLillo,” I answer.

“Yeah,” Rhodes answers. “That’s the only person I can think of who has confronted these questions of, you know, the individual who finds himself negotiating both vast currents of history and a very specific kind of power dynamics. That’s his milieu. And that’s what it’s like to work in the U.S. foreign-policy apparatus in 2016.”

**It has been rare** to find Ben Rhodes’s name in news stories about the large events of the past seven years, unless you are looking for the quotation from an unnamed senior official in Paragraph 9. He is invisible because he is not an egotist, and because he is devoted to the president. But once you are attuned to the distinctive qualities of Rhodes’s voice — which is often laced with aggressive contempt for anyone or anything that stands in the president’s way — you can hear him everywhere.

Rhodes’s mother and father are not interested in talking about Rhodes. Neither is his older brother, David, who is president of CBS News, an organization that recently revived the effort to declassify the contents of the redacted 28 pages of the Sept. 11 report on the eve of Obama’s visit to Saudi Arabia, on which Rhodes, as usual, accompanied the president. The brothers are close, but they often go months without seeing each other. “He was like the kid who carried the briefcase to school,” Ben says of his brother, who worked at Fox News and Bloomberg before moving to CBS. “I actually didn’t do that great in high school because I was drinking and smoking pot and hanging out in Central Park.”

Rhodes’s impassioned yet depressive vibe, which I feel in his stray remarks and in the strangeness of his decision to allow me to roam around the White House, stems in part from feeling overloaded; he wishes he had more time to think and write. His mother is Jewish from the Upper East Side, and worships John Updike, and reads The New Yorker. His father is a Texan lawyer who took his sons to St. Thomas Episcopal Church once a month, where Rhodes felt like the Jewish kid in church, the same way he felt like a “Jewish Christian” at Passover Seders. His New York City prep-school-kid combination of vulnerability, brattiness and passionate hatred for phonies suggests an only slightly updated version of what Holden Caulfield might have been like if he grew up to work in the West Wing.

Photo

Rhodes’s windowless back office, which doesn’t have a TV screen, is an oasis of late-night calm in a building devoted to the performance of power. The walls are painted a soft creamy color, which gives it the feel of an upscale hotel room with the drapes closed. He arrives here every morning between 8 and 9 from a modest two-bedroom apartment in a grad-student-type building in an unpretentious Washington neighborhood around the corner from his favorite post-collegiate bar. Before coming to work, he walks his 1-year-old daughter to day care. Then he drives to work in his Beamer, which appears to be the one grown-up luxury he and his wife, Ann Norris, who works in the State Department and longs to return to her childhood home of California, can afford. When his wife takes the car, he rides the bus, which offers him a touch of the anonymity he craves. His days at the White House start with the president’s daily briefing, which usually includes the vice president, National Security Adviser Susan Rice, Deputy National Security Adviser Avril Haines and Homeland Security Adviser Lisa Monaco.

The books on his shelves are a mix of DeLillo novels, history books, recondite tomes on Cuba and Burma and adventure-wonk stuff like Mark Mazzetti’s “The Way of the Knife.” C. S. Lewis makes an appearance here, alongside a volume of Lincoln speeches (Obama tells all his speechwriters to read Lincoln) and George Orwell’s “All Art Is Propaganda.” I have seen the same books on the shelves of plenty of Brooklyn apartments. Yet some large part of the recent history of America and its role in the world turns on the fact that the entirely familiar person sitting at the desk in front of me, who seems not unlike other weed-smokers I know who write Frederick Barthelme-type short stories, has achieved a “mind meld” with President Obama and used his skills to help execute a radical shift in American foreign policy.

So I wonder: How did he get from there to here?

**The story that** Rhodes published in The Beloit Fiction Journal is a good place to start.

The goldfish idea, I’m told, had been Ms. Wellberg’s.
“Why?” I ask. She is dyed blond, slim, petite, attractive.
“You take meticulous notes,” she slurs.

The editor at Foreign Policy who read “Goldfish,” which Rhodes attached with his query letter, said that the young M.F.A. would be bored with fact-checking. Instead, he suggested that he apply for a job with Lee Hamilton, the onetime congressman from Indiana, who was looking for a speechwriter.

“I was surprised,” Hamilton remembered. “What the hell does a guy who wanted to write fiction come to me for?” But he had always found writers useful, and Rhodes’s writing sample was the best in the pile. So he hired him on at the Wilson Center, a nonpartisan think tank. Though Rhodes never said a word in meetings, Hamilton says, he had a keen understanding of what was going on and a talent for putting the positions of distinguished participants down on paper. “I immediately understood that it’s a very important quality for a staffer,” Hamilton explained, “that he could come into a meeting and decide what was decided.” I suggested that the phrase “decide what was decided” is suggestive of the enormous power that might accrue to someone with Rhodes’s gifts. Hamilton nodded. “Absolutely,” he said.

The notes go on and on. They have ideas with subsets of ideas and reactions to ideas indented beneath the original ideas. The handwriting is perfect. The representation of what happened in the meetings immaculate, like a mirror’s reflection after it has been scrubbed clean. I have a reputation for my notes.

Rhodes served as Hamilton’s staff member on the 9/11 Commission, where he met Denis McDonough, another Hamilton protégé, who had gone on to work for Tom Daschle in the Senate. Rhodes then became the chief note-taker for the Iraq Study Group, the bipartisan commission that excoriated George Bush’s war in Iraq. He accompanied Hamilton and his Republican counterpart on the group, former secretary of state and Bush family intimate James Baker, to their meetings with Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Stephen Hadley, David Petraeus and many others (Vice President Dick Cheney met with the group but didn’t say a word). According to both Hamilton and Edward Djerejian, Baker’s second on the I.S.G., Rhodes’s opinions were helpful in shaping the group’s conclusions — a scathing indictment of the policy makers responsible for invading Iraq. For Rhodes, who wrote much of the I.S.G. report, the Iraq war was proof, in black and white, not of the complexity of international affairs or the many perils attendant on political decision-making but of the fact that the decision-makers were morons.

One result of this experience was that when Rhodes joined the Obama campaign in 2007, he arguably knew more about the Iraq war than the candidate himself, or any of his advisers. He had also developed a healthy contempt for the American foreign-policy establishment, including editors and reporters at The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New Yorker and elsewhere, who at first applauded the Iraq war and then sought to pin all the blame on Bush and his merry band of neocons when it quickly turned sour. If anything, that anger has grown fiercer during Rhodes’s time in the White House. He referred to the American foreign-policy establishment as the Blob. According to Rhodes, the Blob includes Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates and other Iraq-war promoters from both parties who now whine incessantly about the collapse of the American security order in Europe and the Middle East.

Boost thinks very highly of me. My notes are so impressive that they have taken on the form of ideas, he feels. I capture other people’s words in a manner that not only organizes them, but inserts a clarity and purpose that was not present in the original idea. Connections are made between two opposing ideas that were not apparent in the meeting. I have gotten at not only the representation of things, but the way that the mind actually works.

Jon Favreau, then the campaign’s lead speechwriter, felt as if he could use a foreign-affairs expert who could write. “Foreign-policy advisers kept changing all the language that made Obama sound like he wasn’t part of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment,” he remembers. “The idea of someone with a masters in fiction who had also co-authored the Iraq Study Group and 9/11 Commission reports seemed perfect for a candidate who put so much emphasis on storytelling.” The two young speechwriters quickly found themselves to be in sync. “He truly gives zero [expletive] about what most people in Washington think,” Favreau says admiringly of Rhodes. “I think he’s always seen his time there as temporary and won’t care if he’s never again invited to a cocktail party, or asked to appear on ‘Morning Joe,’ or inducted into the Council on Foreign Relations hall of fame or whatever the hell they do there.”

I sit next to Boost in the meetings. The ideas fly like radio waves. I am silent in these meetings, taking notes.

“He was easily underestimatable,” Samantha Power recalls, of Rhodes’s arrival on the Obama campaign in 2007. Herself a writer, whose history of America’s responses to genocide, “A Problem From Hell,” won the Pulitzer Prize, Power went to work in Obama’s Senate office in 2005. Power is now the American ambassador to the United Nations. Her attire suggests a disingenuous ambivalence about her role in government that appears to be common among her cohort in the Obama administration, with a cardigan made of thick, expensive-looking cashmere worn over a simple frock, along with silver spray-painted rock ’n’ roll sneakers. See, I’m sympatico, the sneakers proclaim.

Early on, what struck her about Rhodes was how strategic he was. “He was leading quietly, initially, and mainly just through track changes, like what to accept and reject,” she says. When I ask her where Rhodes’s control over drafts of the candidate’s speeches came from, she immediately answers, “Obama,” but then qualifies her answer. “But it was Hobbesian,” she adds. “He had the pen. And he understood intuitively that having the pen gave him that control.” His judgment was superior to that of his rivals, and he refused to ever back down. “He was just defiant,” she recalls. “He was like: ‘No, I’m not. That’s bad. Obama wouldn’t want that.’ ”

Obama relies on Rhodes for “an unvarnished take,” in part, she says, because “Ben just has no poker face,” and so it’s easy to see when he is feeling uncomfortable. “The president will be like, ‘Ben, something on your mind?’ And then Ben will have this incredibly precise lay-down of why the previous half-hour has been an utter waste of time, because there’s a structural flaw to the entire direction of the conversation.”

The literary character that Rhodes most closely resembles, Power volunteers, is Holden Caulfield. “He hates the idea of being phony, and he’s impetuous, and he has very strong views.”

In Afghanistan the Taliban dynamites enormous statues of Buddha, the ancient material imploding and crumbling to the ground, small specks of men can be seen watching in the foreground. This is somewhere else. Far away.

**On his first day** in the West Wing, Rhodes remembers thinking how remarkably small the space was, and noticing that the same few dozen people he worked with at campaign headquarters in Chicago were now wearing suits instead of jeans. The enormousness of the endeavor sank in on that first day, and he realized that for all the prep work, there was no manual for how to be on the staff of the person who is running the country, particularly at a time when the global economy was in free fall and 180,000 Americans were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. He became aware of two things at once: the weight of the issues that the president was confronted with, and the intense global interest in even the most mundane presidential communications.

‘He truly gives zero [expletive] about what most people in Washington think. I think he’s always seen his time there as temporary and won’t care if he’s never again invited to a cocktail party.’

The job he was hired to do, namely to help the president of the United States communicate with the public, was changing in equally significant ways, thanks to the impact of digital technologies that people in Washington were just beginning to wrap their minds around. It is hard for many to absorb the true magnitude of the change in the news business — 40 percent of newspaper-industry professionals have lost their jobs over the past decade — in part because readers can absorb all the news they want from social-media platforms like Facebook, which are valued in the tens and hundreds of billions of dollars and pay nothing for the “content” they provide to their readers. You have to have skin in the game — to be in the news business, or depend in a life-or-death way on its products — to understand the radical and qualitative ways in which words that appear in familiar typefaces have changed. Rhodes singled out a key example to me one day, laced with the brutal contempt that is a hallmark of his private utterances. “All these newspapers used to have foreign bureaus,” he said. “Now they don’t. They call us to explain to them what’s happening in Moscow and Cairo. Most of the outlets are reporting on world events from Washington. The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns. That’s a sea change. They literally know nothing.”

In this environment, Rhodes has become adept at ventriloquizing many people at once. Ned Price, Rhodes’s assistant, gave me a primer on how it’s done. The easiest way for the White House to shape the news, he explained, is from the briefing podiums, each of which has its own dedicated press corps. “But then there are sort of these force multipliers,” he said, adding, “We have our compadres, I will reach out to a couple people, and you know I wouldn’t want to name them — ”

“I can name them,” I said, ticking off a few names of prominent Washington reporters and columnists who often tweet in sync with White House messaging.

Price laughed. “I’ll say, ‘Hey, look, some people are spinning this narrative that this is a sign of American weakness,’ ” he continued, “but — ”

“In fact it’s a sign of strength!” I said, chuckling.

“And I’ll give them some color,” Price continued, “and the next thing I know, lots of these guys are in the dot-com publishing space, and have huge Twitter followings, and they’ll be putting this message out on their own.”

This is something different from old-fashioned spin, which tended to be an art best practiced in person. In a world where experienced reporters competed for scoops and where carrying water for the White House was a cause for shame, no matter which party was in power, it was much harder to sustain a “narrative” over any serious period of time. Now the most effectively weaponized 140-character idea or quote will almost always carry the day, and it is very difficult for even good reporters to necessarily know where the spin is coming from or why.

When I later visited Obama’s former campaign mastermind David Axelrod in Chicago, I brought up the soft Orwellian vibe of an information space where old media structures and hierarchies have been erased by Silicon Valley billionaires who convinced the suckers that information was “free” and everyone with access to Google was now a reporter. Axelrod, a former newspaperman, sighed. “It’s not as easy as standing in front of a press conference and speaking to 70 million people like past presidents have been able to do,” he said. The bully pulpit by and large doesn’t exist anymore, he explained. “So more and more, over the last couple of years, there’s been an investment in alternative means of communication: using digital more effectively, going to nontraditional sources, understanding where on each issue your constituencies are going to be found,” he said. “I think they’ve approached these major foreign-policy challenges as campaign challenges, and they’ve run campaigns, and those campaigns have been very sophisticated.”

**Rhodes’s innovative campaign** to sell the Iran deal is likely to be a model for how future administrations explain foreign policy to Congress and the public. The way in which most Americans have heard the story of the Iran deal presented — that the Obama administration began seriously engaging with Iranian officials in 2013 in order to take advantage of a new political reality in Iran, which came about because of elections that brought moderates to power in that country — was largely manufactured for the purpose for selling the deal. Even where the particulars of that story are true, the implications that readers and viewers are encouraged to take away from those particulars are often misleading or false. Obama’s closest advisers always understood him to be eager to do a deal with Iran as far back as 2012, and even since the beginning of his presidency. “It’s the center of the arc,” Rhodes explained to me two days after the deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was implemented. He then checked off the ways in which the administration’s foreign-policy aims and priorities converged on Iran. “We don’t have to kind of be in cycles of conflict if we can find other ways to resolve these issues,” he said. “We can do things that challenge the conventional thinking that, you know, ‘AIPAC doesn’t like this,’ or ‘the Israeli government doesn’t like this,’ or ‘the gulf countries don’t like it.’ It’s the possibility of improved relations with adversaries. It’s nonproliferation. So all these threads that the president’s been spinning — and I mean that not in the press sense — for almost a decade, they kind of all converged around Iran.”

In the narrative that Rhodes shaped, the “story” of the Iran deal began in 2013, when a “moderate” faction inside the Iranian regime led by Hassan Rouhani beat regime “hard-liners” in an election and then began to pursue a policy of “openness,” which included a newfound willingness to negotiate the dismantling of its illicit nuclear-weapons program. The president set out the timeline himself in his speech announcing the nuclear deal on July 14, 2015: “Today, after two years of negotiations, the United States, together with our international partners, has achieved something that decades of animosity has not.” While the president’s statement was technically accurate — there had in fact been two years of formal negotiations leading up to the signing of the J.C.P.O.A. — it was also actively misleading, because the most meaningful part of the negotiations with Iran had begun in mid-2012, many months before Rouhani and the “moderate” camp were chosen in an election among candidates handpicked by Iran’s supreme leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The idea that there was a new reality in Iran was politically useful to the Obama administration. By obtaining broad public currency for the thought that there was a significant split in the regime, and that the administration was reaching out to moderate-minded Iranians who wanted peaceful relations with their neighbors and with America, Obama was able to evade what might have otherwise been a divisive but clarifying debate over the actual policy choices that his administration was making. By eliminating the fuss about Iran’s nuclear program, the administration hoped to eliminate a source of structural tension between the two countries, which would create the space for America to disentangle itself from its established system of alliances with countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey. With one bold move, the administration would effectively begin the process of a large-scale disengagement from the Middle East.

The nerve center for the selling of the Iran deal to Congress, which took place in a concentrated three-month period between July and September of last year, was located inside the White House, and is referred to by its former denizens as “the war room.” Chad Kreikemeier, a Nebraskan who had worked in the White House Office of Legislative Affairs, helped run the team, which included three to six people from each of several agencies, he says, which were the State Department, Treasury, the American delegation to the United Nations (i.e., Samantha Power), “at times D.O.D.” (the Department of Defense) and also the Department of Energy and the National Security Council. Rhodes “was kind of like the quarterback,” running the daily video conferences and coming up with lines of attack and parry. “He was extremely good about immediately getting to a phrase or a way of getting the message out that just made more sense,” Kreikemeier remembers. Framing the deal as a choice between peace and war was Rhodes’s go-to move — and proved to be a winning argument.

The person whom Kreikemeier credits with running the digital side of the campaign was Tanya Somanader, 31, the director of digital response for the White House Office of Digital Strategy, who became known in the war room and on Twitter as @TheIranDeal. Early on, Rhodes asked her to create a rapid-response account that fact-checked everything related to the Iran deal. “So, we developed a plan that was like: The Iran deal is literally going to be the tip of everything that we stand up online,” Somanader says. “And we’re going to map it onto what we know about the different audiences we’re dealing with: the public, pundits, experts, the right wing, Congress.” By applying 21st-century data and networking tools to the white-glove world of foreign affairs, the White House was able to track what United States senators and the people who worked for them, and influenced them, were seeing online — and make sure that no potential negative comment passed without a tweet.

As she explained how the process worked, I was struck by how naïve the assumption of a “state of nature” must seem in an information environment that is mediated less and less by experienced editors and reporters with any real prior knowledge of the subjects they write about. “People construct their own sense of source and credibility now,” she said. “They elect who they’re going to believe.” For those in need of more traditional-seeming forms of validation, handpicked Beltway insiders like Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic and Laura Rozen of Al-Monitor helped retail the administration’s narrative. “Laura Rozen was my RSS feed,” Somanader offered. “She would just find everything and retweet it.”

Rhodes’s messaging campaign was so effective not simply because it was a perfectly planned and executed example of digital strategy, but also because he was personally involved in guiding the deal itself. In July 2012, Jake Sullivan, a close aide to Hillary Clinton, traveled to Muscat, Oman, for the first meeting with the Iranians, taking a message from the White House. “It was, ‘We’re prepared to open a direct channel to resolve the nuclear agreement if you are prepared to do the same thing and authorize it at the highest levels and engage in a serious discussion on these issues,’ ” Sullivan remembers. “Once that was agreed to, it was quickly decided that we resolve the nuclear agreement in two steps, the interim agreement and the final agreement.” Subsequent meetings with the Iranians followed, during which he was joined by Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns. “Bill and I had a huge amount of license to explore what the terms would look like, within the negotiating parameters,” Sullivan says. “What the precise trade-offs would be, between forms of sanctions relief and forms of restraints on their programs, that was left to us to feel out.”

The fact that the president largely let his surrogates do the talking and the selling of the Iran deal — and even now, rarely talks about it in public — does not reflect his level of direct engagement. Sullivan and Burns spent hours before and after every session in Oman with the president and his closest advisers in the White House. When the president wasn’t present, Rhodes always was. “Ben and I, in particular, the two of us, spent a lot of time thinking through all the angles,” Sullivan says. “We spent three, four, five hours together in Washington talking things through before the meetings.” In March 2013, a full three months before the elections that elevated Hassan Rouhani to the office of president, Sullivan and Burns finalized their proposal for an interim agreement, which became the basis for the J.C.P.O.A.

The White House point person during the later stage of the negotiations was Rob Malley, a favored troubleshooter who is currently running negotiations that could keep the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in power. During the course of the Iran talks, Malley told me, he always kept in close contact with Rhodes. “I would often just call him and say, ‘Give me a reality check,’ ” Malley explained. “He could say, ‘Here is where I think the president is, and here is where I think he will be.’ ” He continued, “Ben would try to anticipate: Does it make sense policywise? But then he would also ask himself: How do we sell it to Congress? How do we sell it to the public? What is it going to do to our narrative?”

Malley is a particularly keen observer of the changing art of political communication; his father, Simon Malley, who was born in Cairo, edited the politics magazine Afrique Asie and proudly provided a platform for Fidel Castro and Yasir Arafat, in the days when the leaders’ words might take weeks to travel from Cuba or Cairo to Paris. “The Iran experience was the place where I saw firsthand how policy, politics and messaging all had to be brought together, and I think that Ben is really at the intersection of all three,” Malley says. “He reflects and he shapes at the same time.”

As Malley and representatives of the State Department, including Wendy Sherman and Secretary of State John Kerry, engaged in formal negotiations with the Iranians, to ratify details of a framework that had already been agreed upon, Rhodes’s war room did its work on Capitol Hill and with reporters. In the spring of last year, legions of arms-control experts began popping up at think tanks and on social media, and then became key sources for hundreds of often-clueless reporters. “We created an echo chamber,” he admitted, when I asked him to explain the onslaught of freshly minted experts cheerleading for the deal. “They were saying things that validated what we had given them to say.”

When I suggested that all this dark metafictional play seemed a bit removed from rational debate over America’s future role in the world, Rhodes nodded. “In the absence of rational discourse, we are going to discourse the [expletive] out of this,” he said. “We had test drives to know who was going to be able to carry our message effectively, and how to use outside groups like Ploughshares, the Iran Project and whomever else. So we knew the tactics that worked.” He is proud of the way he sold the Iran deal. “We drove them crazy,” he said of the deal’s opponents.

Yet Rhodes bridled at the suggestion that there has been anything deceptive about the way that the agreement itself was sold. “Look, with Iran, in a weird way, these are state-to-state issues. They’re agreements between governments. Yes, I would prefer that it turns out that Rouhani and Zarif” — Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister — “are real reformers who are going to be steering this country into the direction that I believe it can go in, because their public is educated and, in some respects, pro-American. But we are not betting on that.”

In fact, Rhodes’s passion seems to derive not from any investment in the technical specifics of sanctions or centrifuge arrays, or any particular optimism about the future course of Iranian politics and society. Those are matters for the negotiators and area specialists. Rather, it derived from his own sense of the urgency of radically reorienting American policy in the Middle East in order to make the prospect of American involvement in the region’s future wars a lot less likely. When I asked whether the prospect of this same kind of far-reaching spin campaign being run by a different administration is something that scares him, he admitted that it does. “I mean, I’d prefer a sober, reasoned public debate, after which members of Congress reflect and take a vote,” he said, shrugging. “But that’s impossible.”

**Getting Rhodes to** speak directly about the man whose gestalt he channels is a bit like asking someone to look into a mirror while describing someone else’s face. The Obama he talks about in public is, in part, a character that he has helped to create — based on a real person, of course — and is embedded in story lines that he personally constructs and manages. At the same time, he believes very deeply in Obama, the man and the president, and in the policies that he has helped to structure and sell on his behalf.

Obama’s particular revulsion against a certain kind of global power politics is a product, Rhodes suggests, of his having been raised in Southeast Asia. “Indonesia was a place where your interaction at that time with power was very intimate, right?” Rhodes asks. “Tens or hundreds of thousands of people had just been killed. Power was not some abstract thing,” he muses. “When we sit in Washington and debate foreign policy, it’s like a Risk game, or it’s all about us, or the human beings disappear from the decisions. But he lived in a place where he was surrounded by people who had either perpetrated those acts — and by the way, may not have felt great about that — or else knew someone who was a victim. I don’t think there’s ever been an American president who had an experience like that at a young age of what power is.”

The parts of Obama’s foreign policy that disturb some of his friends on the left, like drone strikes, Rhodes says, are a result of Obama’s particular kind of globalism, which understands the hard and at times absolute necessity of killing. Yet, at the same time, they are also ways of avoiding more deadly uses of force — a kind of low-body-count spin move.

 ‘We created an echo chamber,’ he admitted, when I asked him to explain the onslaught of freshly minted experts cheerleading for the deal. ‘They were saying things that validated what we had given them to say.’

He leans back and opens a drawer in the file cabinet behind his desk, and removes a folder. “I was going to show you something,” he says, removing a sheaf of yellow legal paper covered in longhand. “Just to confirm for you that he really is a writer.” He shows me the president’s copy of his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, a revision of an original draft by Favreau and Rhodes whose defining tension was accepting a prize awarded before he had actually accomplished anything. In his longhand notes, Obama relocated the speech’s tension in the fact that he was accepting a peace prize a week after ordering 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan. King and Gandhi were the author’s heroes, yet he couldn’t act as they did, because he runs a state. The reason that the author had to exercise power was because not everyone in the world is rational.

We sit for a while, and I examine the president’s thoughts unfolding on the page, and the lawyerly, abstract nature of his writing process. “Moral imagination, spheres of identity, but also move beyond cheap lazy pronouncements,” one note reads. Here was the new American self — rational, moral, not self-indulgent. No longer one thing but multiple overlapping spheres or circles. Who is described here? As usual, the author is describing himself.

Valerie Jarrett has been called the president’s work wife and is the only member of the West Wing staff who knew Obama before he began contemplating a run for the presidency. What I want to understand better, I tell her, are the swirls of the president’s emotional fingerprint, which I saw in the longhand draft of his Nobel speech. We talk for a while about being American and at the same time being from somewhere else, and the split-screen experience of reality that experience allows. Jarrett was born in Iran and spent her early childhood there.

“Was it a point of connection between you and the president that you had each spent some substantial part of your childhoods living in another country?” I ask. Her face lights up.

“Absolutely,” she answers. The question is important to her. “The first conversation we had over dinner, when we first met, was about what it was like for both of us to live in countries that were predominantly Muslim countries at formative parts of our childhood and the perspective it gave us about the United States and how uniquely excellent it is,” she says. “We talked about what it was like to be children, and how we played with children who had totally different backgrounds than our own but you would find something in common.” She recalls her very first dinner together with the new fiancé of her protégée Michelle Robinson. “I remember him asking me questions that I felt like no one else has ever asked me before,” she says, “and he asked me from a perspective of someone who knew the same experience that I had. So it felt really good. I was like, ‘Oh, finally someone who gets it.’ ”

**Barack Obama is** not a standard-issue liberal Democrat. He openly shares Rhodes’s contempt for the groupthink of the American foreign-policy establishment and its hangers-on in the press. Yet one problem with the new script that Obama and Rhodes have written is that the Blob may have finally caught on.

“He is a brilliant guy, but he has a real problem with what I call the assignment of bad faith,” one former senior official told me of the president. “He regards everyone on the other side at this point as being a bunch of bloodthirsty know-nothings from a different era who play by the old book. He hears arguments like, ‘We should be punching Iran in the nose on its shipments of arms, and do it publicly,’ or ‘We should sanction the crap out of them for their ballistic-missile test and tell them that if they do it again we’re going to do this or we’re going to do that,’ and he hears Dick Cheney in those arguments.”

Another official I spoke to put the same point more succinctly: “Clearly the world has disappointed him.” When I asked whether he believed that the Oval Office debate over Syria policy in 2012 — resulting in a decision not to support the uprising against Assad in any meaningful way — had been an honest and open one, he said that he had believed that it was, but has since changed his mind. “Instead of adjusting his policies to the reality, and adjusting his perception of reality to the changing realities on the ground, the conclusions he draws are exactly the same, no matter what the costs have been to our strategic interests,” he says. “In an odd way, he reminds me of Bush.” The comparison is a startling one — and yet, questions of tone aside, it is uncomfortably easy to see the similarities between the two men, American presidents who projected their own ideas of the good onto an indifferent world.

One of the few charter members of the Blob willing to speak on the record is Leon Panetta, who was Obama’s head of the C.I.A. and secretary of defense and also enough of a product of a different culture to give honest answers to what he understands to be questions of consequence. At his institute at the old Fort Ord in Seaside, Calif., where, in the days before he wore Mr. Rogers sweaters, he served as a young Army intelligence officer, I ask him about a crucial component of the administration’s public narrative on Iran: whether it was ever a salient feature of the C.I.A.’s analysis when he ran the agency that the Iranian regime was meaningfully divided between “hard-line” and “moderate” camps.

 “No,” Panetta answers. “There was not much question that the Quds Force and the supreme leader ran that country with a strong arm, and there was not much question that this kind of opposing view could somehow gain any traction.”

I ask Panetta whether, as head of the C.I.A., or later on, as secretary of defense, he ever saw the letters that Obama covertly sent to Khamenei, in 2009 and in 2012, which were only reported on by the press weeks later.

“No,” he answers, before saying he would “like to believe” that Tom Donilon, national security adviser since 2010, and Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, had a chance to work on the offer they presented.

As secretary of defense, he tells me, one of his most important jobs was keeping Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and his defense minister, Ehud Barak, from launching a pre-emptive attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. “They were both interested in the answer to the question, ‘Is the president serious?’ ” Panetta recalls. “And you know my view, talking with the president, was: If brought to the point where we had evidence that they’re developing an atomic weapon, I think the president is serious that he is not going to allow that to happen.”

Panetta stops.

“But would you make that same assessment now?” I ask him.

“Would I make that same assessment now?” he asks. “Probably not.”

He understands the president’s pivot toward Iran as the logical result of a deeply held premise about the negative effects of use of American military force on a scale much larger than drone strikes or Special Forces raids. “I think the whole legacy that he was working on was, ‘I’m the guy who’s going to bring these wars to an end, and the last goddamn thing I need is to start another war,’ ” he explains of Obama. “If you ratchet up sanctions, it could cause a war. If you start opposing their interest in Syria, well, that could start a war, too.”

In Panetta’s telling, his own experience at the Pentagon under Obama sometimes resembled being installed in the driver’s seat of a car and finding that the steering wheel and brakes had been disconnected from the engine. Obama and his aides used political elders like him, Robert Gates and Hillary Clinton as cover to end the Iraq war, and then decided to steer their own course, he suggests. While Panetta pointedly never mentions Rhodes’s name, it is clear whom he is talking about.

“There were staff people who put themselves in a position where they kind of assumed where the president’s head was on a particular issue, and they thought their job was not to go through this open process of having people present all these different options, but to try to force the process to where they thought the president wanted to be,” he says. “They’d say, ‘Well, this is where we want you to come out.’ And I’d say ‘[expletive], that’s not the way it works. We’ll present a plan, and then the president can make a decision.’ I mean, Jesus Christ, it is the president of the United States, you’re making some big decisions here, he ought to be entitled to hear all of those viewpoints and not to be driven down a certain path.”

But that can’t be true, I tell Panetta, because the aides he is talking about had no independent power aside from the authority that the president himself gave them.

“Well, that’s a good question,” Panetta allows. “He’s a smart guy, he’s not dumb.” It’s all part of the Washington blame game. Just as Panetta can blame young aides in order to avoid blaming the president for his actual choices, the president used his aides to tell Panetta to take a hike. Perhaps the president and his aides were continually unable to predict the consequences of their actions in Syria, and made mistake after mistake, while imagining that it was going to come out right the next time. “Another read, which isn’t necessarily opposed to that,” I continue, “is that their actual picture is entirely coherent. But if they put it in blunt, unnuanced terms — ”

Panetta completes my sentence: “ — they’d get the [expletive] kicked out of them.” He looks at me curiously. “Let me ask you something,” he says. “Did you present this theory to Ben Rhodes?”

**“Oh, God,” Rhodes** says. “The reason the president has bucked a lot of establishment thinking is because he does not agree with establishment thinking. Not because I or Denis McDonough are sitting here.” He pushes back in his chair. “The complete lack of governance in huge swaths of the Middle East, that is the project of the American establishment,” he declares. “That as much as Iraq is what angered me.”

There is something dangerously naïve about this kind of talk, in which words like “balance,” “stakeholders” and “interests” are endlessly reshuffled like word tiles in a magnetic-poetry set, with little regard for the immutable contingencies that shaped America’s role in the world. But that’s hardly fair. Ben Rhodes wanted to do right, and maybe, when the arc of history lands, it will turn out that he did. At least, he tried. Something scared him, and made him feel as if the grown-ups in Washington didn’t know what they were talking about, and it’s hard to argue that he was wrong.

What has interested me most about watching him and his cohort in the White House over the past seven years, I tell him, is the evolution of their ability to get comfortable with tragedy. I am thinking specifically about Syria, I add, where more than 450,000 people have been slaughtered.

“Yeah, I admit very much to that reality,” he says. “There’s a numbing element to Syria in particular. But I will tell you this,” he continues. “I profoundly do not believe that the United States could make things better in Syria by being there. And we have an evidentiary record of what happens when we’re there — nearly a decade in Iraq.”

Iraq is his one-word answer to any and all criticism. I was against the Iraq war from the beginning, I tell Rhodes, so I understand why he perpetually returns to it. I also understand why Obama pulled the plug on America’s engagement with the Middle East, I say, but it was also true as a result that more people are dying there on his watch than died during the Bush presidency, even if very few of them are Americans. What I don’t understand is why, if America is getting out of the Middle East, we are apparently spending so much time and energy trying to strong-arm Syrian rebels into surrendering to the dictator who murdered their families, or why it is so important for Iran to maintain its supply lines to Hezbollah. He mutters something about John Kerry, and then goes off the record, to suggest, in effect, that the world of the Sunni Arabs that the American establishment built has collapsed. The buck stops with the establishment, not with Obama, who was left to clean up their mess.

It is clearly time for me to go. Rhodes walks me out into the sunlight of the West Wing parking lot, where we are treated to the sight of the aged Henry Kissinger, who has come to pay a visit. I ask Rhodes if he has ever met the famous diplomat before, and he tells me about the time they were seated together at a state dinner for the president of China. It was an interesting encounter to imagine, between Kissinger, who made peace with Mao’s China while bombing Laos to bits, and Rhodes, who helped effect a similar diplomatic volte-face with Iran but kept the United States out of a civil war in Syria, which has caused more than four million people to become refugees. I ask Rhodes how it felt being seated next to the embodiment of American realpolitik. “It was surreal,” he says, looking off into the middle distance. “I told him I was going to Laos,” he continues. “He got a weird look in his eye.”