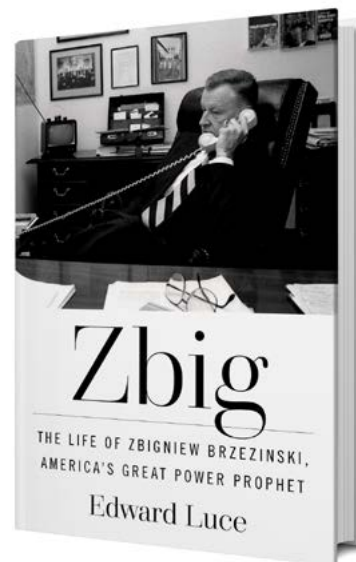


# intelligence in public media

## *Zbig: The Life of Zbigniew Brzezinski, America's Great Power Prophet*

Reviewed by Morgan Voeltz Swanson

**Author:** Edward Luce  
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Scholar-statesman Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928–2017) was a giant of US foreign policy whose consistently prescient strategic vision served presidents across political lines. In his new biography, *Zbig: The Life of Zbigniew Brzezinski, America's Great Power Prophet*, Edward Luce renders a thorough and clear-eyed portrait of a unique leader in a critical role. Luce has delivered an invaluable case study of the complicated realities of foreign policy decision-making, and a front-row seat to historical events that are still playing out today. Perhaps most interesting, *Zbig* clearly unpacks what made Brzezinski's read of global power dynamics so astute and so impactful.

Luce, US national editor and columnist for the *Financial Times*, tapped extensive primary-source materials that offered a range of authoritative, firsthand perspectives on Brzezinski. The Brzezinski family granted Luce

condition-free access to robust family records including Brzezinski's own daily Dictaphone diaries from his years at the White House, access to settings that were Brzezinski's own life backdrops, and interviews with his family members and lifelong friends. Luce also drew on interviews with Brzezinski's colleagues, contemporaries, rivals, and even KGB files.

The biography's cradle-to-grave format is a classic choice made especially powerful for the interplay between Brzezinski's experience and world events. Luce delves into Brzezinski's formative experience to show its lasting impact on his worldview. Brzezinski was born in Poland to a family with noble roots; on the eve of World War II, they moved to Canada where his father assumed a diplomatic posting. From there, a school-aged Brzezinski watched across the Atlantic as the USSR took over

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Poland and war engulfed Europe. These disruptive events seeded what Luce dubs Brzezinski's "quest to hold the USSR to account," a single overarching goal that would later drive all his choices. (2)

*Zbig* reveals how Brzezinski's academic years cemented his expertise in Soviet matters, expanded his personal capital, and honed his eye on Washington. Ascending the academic ladders at Harvard and Columbia Universities, researching for his earliest books and musings, Brzezinski's embrace of multi-disciplinary perspectives enhanced his judgments. He applied his Russian language skills, studied Soviet political rhetoric, and considered history, culture, and identity to identify Soviet client states as the USSR's Achilles' heel and key to the bloc's unraveling. (97) Brzezinski used travel to test his ideas, and he built relationships with rising leaders in Europe and across the world that deepened his perspective while boosting his influence and access. At home, his networking efforts with US foreign policy influencers and his growing stable of White House contacts were "frenetic." (107) They bore fruit when Carter tapped him to be national security advisor.

At the epicenter of foreign policy making under Carter, Brzezinski was a master of his domain not only for his command of substance, but for his understanding of the process of foreign policy decision making. Brzezinski seemed intuitively aware that choices depended on converging factors that often defied logic, including domestic political dynamics, personal relationships, and Carter's unique style. He played to all of them while supporting Carter's efforts to build strategic ties with China, broker peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, navigate controversy over Iran, and maneuver against the USSR. Luce calls Carter's reliance on Brzezinski "one of the least likely yet most consequential relationships between a US president and an adviser." (373) It is worth applauding Luce's discerning take on Carter, as well as the insightful touch he applies to other US and world leaders,

including Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping and Pope John Paul II, who make cameo appearances in Brzezinski's story.

Luce uses clearly sourced comments and crisp journalistic prose to tackle controversy surrounding Brzezinski's outsize role, opinions, and personal flaws. By placing one detail after another, Luce upholds his objective perspective and allows readers to draw their own conclusions. His approach encourages a second look at some common misperceptions. The evidence on Brzezinski's acquaintance with reputed rival Henry Kissinger reveals a nuanced and ultimately meaningful relationship. Luce takes well-earned license to insert his own keen judgments to address seemingly contradictory elements of Brzezinski's style, such as when "his abstract writing style detracted from his message" or when his laser focus on encircling the USSR led him to treat human rights in China "as a selective tool rather than a universal standard." (409)

Despite controversy, Brzezinski's ideas continued to resonate across political lines as presidents including Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barak Obama sought his counsel for the rest of his life. True to his style, Brzezinski also continued to resist political or ideological labels. (117) His prophetic knack remained striking in his later publications, and Luce calls the prescience of his final book in 1992 "uncanny." (414)

*Zbig* is a valuable read for intelligence professionals as a reminder of the value of multidisciplinary perspectives for forming a deep understanding of global dynamics. It is a master class in the human-centric nature of foreign policy and interagency dynamics across US administrations. Finally, and more broadly, *Zbig* underscores the roots of today's questions, as many challenges that Brzezinski faced in China, Europe, the Middle East, and Russia remain unresolved. ■