

## Epilogue: Unfinished Business

On January 20, 2012, three years after Barack Obama took the oath of office as president, the world was particularly unsettled. Over the previous months, there had been a series of political convulsions in Egypt, Libya, Syria, North Korea, Pakistan and Russia. The European economy was still in perilous shape and so (for very different reasons) was Iran's. In China, the Communist Party leadership was tightening up its repression and stepping up its shrill condemnations of the West as it sought to make sure an economic slowdown could not lead to a spread in social unrest.

These events served to demonstrate not just what Obama had accomplished, but also how much had eluded him. Obama was in the process of recasting American policy for a new, post-Iraq era, one in which the United States would have to cope with increasing budgetary constraints and diminishing influence over the course of events. Yet the list of unfinished business was a long one.

Obama could point to the death of Osama bin Laden as a triumph. (Indeed, it was already clear at the beginning of 2012 that the Obamians were preparing to showcase the killing of the mastermind of the September 11 attacks as a core element in the president's campaign for reelection.) And indeed, the Bin Laden raid was the prime example of a much larger change: The increased use of drones and special operations had altered the course of the war against al-Qaeda in America's favor.

Yet elsewhere most of Obama's achievements, while real, seemed provisional or preliminary, merely setting the stage for the United States to have to confront more fundamental problems. In finally cutting America loose from Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, for example, Obama succeeded in opening

the way for change there, but then found himself facing new quandaries: how to persuade the Egyptian army to give up its control of the country; how to cope with the rise of popular Islamic movements newly empowered by democracy; and how to deal with other longtime American partners in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, that were just as anti-democratic as Mubarak and were upset that the United States had encouraged his resignation. In similar fashion, Obama had, to his credit, managed to drain the poison out of America's relations with Europe in such a way that European leaders were more able to work with the United States on issues such as economic sanctions against Iran. Yet the cooperation on the Iran sanctions merely highlighted the larger problem, which was Iran itself. As Obama moved into his fourth year in the White House, all efforts to end its nuclear program had been unavailing.

On December 19, 2011, North Korea announced the death of Kim Jong-Il, the leader who had ruled the country and supervised its development of nuclear weapons for the previous seventeen years. Kim was merely the last of several international figures who died, were killed or fell from power in 2011. The list also included Gaddafi in Libya, Mubarak in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. There was every reason to think that 2012 would be similarly tumultuous. There would be presidential elections not only in the United States but also in France, Russia, Taiwan, Mexico, Venezuela and probably Egypt. China's Communist Party was preparing for a change in leadership. In Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was locked in an intense power struggle with the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad was clinging to power amid continuing civil strife and growing international isolation. Amid all these other uncertainties, the European financial crisis still threatened to deal another shock to the world's economy.

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Looking around the world, Obama and his aides thought of themselves as having been generally successful. There was one specific foreign-policy problem, however, on which they freely acknowledged things had not gone well: their efforts to move toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. "We have not gotten the results that we wanted to have in the Arab-Israeli peace

process, no doubt,” reflected Tom Donilon, Obama’s national security adviser. “There are a lot of reasons for that, but I think that if there has been a place where we have not been able to achieve the goals along the path we set out at the beginning, it is there.”<sup>1</sup>

The underlying dynamics had been set in motion only a few weeks after Obama’s inauguration, when Israeli elections led to the return of the Likud Party’s Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister. Obama, during his presidential campaign, had been recorded on tape telling one private group, “I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel that you’re anti-Israel, and that can’t be the measure of our friendship with Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

Obama’s mentor Abner Mikva, other Chicago friends, and several members of his new administration, such as Rahm Emanuel, had all emphasized the importance of persuading Israel to stop building new settlements in the occupied territories claimed by the Palestinians. Once in the White House, Obama moved fairly quickly to put this idea into effect. In his Cairo speech in June 2009, he said, without qualification, “It is time for these settlements to stop.” On this issue, as with others early in his presidency, Obama seemed to be trying to follow the example of the George H. W. Bush administration, which had also applied strong pressure on Israel to freeze settlements.

But the attempt failed; Netanyahu resisted the pressure. Relations with Israel reached a nadir in March 2010, when Israeli officials announced the construction of new housing in East Jerusalem just as Vice President Joe Biden was in Israel preparing for meetings there. When Netanyahu visited Washington two weeks later, Obama and his aides treated him icily and made sure their displeasure was made public: They allowed no photographs of Netanyahu’s meeting with Obama or any news briefings about it. The tensions were eventually smoothed over.

Eventually, frustrated by the Obama administration’s diminishing influence over Israel, Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, decided to shift his attention to the United Nations and ask it to recognize the existence of a Palestinian state. Obama sought to dissuade him. In his speech concerning the Arab Spring on May 19, 2011, he said the starting point for negotiations over a new Palestinian state should be the borders that existed in 1967, before Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the

Six-Day War. The two sides could then negotiate “mutually agreed swaps” of territory from those 1967 lines, Obama said. Netanyahu, on a trip to the United States, quickly denounced the idea.

Despite Obama’s efforts, America’s influence with the Palestinian leadership was diminishing, too. In the fall of 2011, Abbas formally asked the U.N. Security Council to grant membership to a Palestinian state, rejecting the Obama administration’s pleas to hold off. That in turn forced Obama to reaffirm America’s support for Israel; the administration quickly announced that it would veto any resolution for Palestinian membership.

It became increasingly clear that Obama’s drive for a Middle East peace settlement were going nowhere. Early in 2011, former Senate majority leader George Mitchell resigned as the president’s special envoy to the Middle East. Near the end of the year, Dennis Ross, who had served as Obama’s senior adviser on both Iran and the Middle East, also stepped down. “Ultimately there will be no peace without negotiations,” Ross wrote in early 2012. “But there should also be no illusions about the prospects of a breakthrough any time soon.”<sup>3</sup>

Mitchell and Ross had been two of the three high-level negotiators Obama brought into his new administration. The third was Richard Holbrooke. All had achieved considerable success in the Clinton administration: Mitchell in Northern Ireland, Ross in the Middle East, Holbrooke in the Balkans. None of the three could accomplish anything comparable in the Obama era. While the reasons were different in each case, there was a common underlying factor: the United States simply had a far less dominant role in the world between 2009 and 2012 than it had had in the 1990s.

The Obama administration also found itself struggling to keep up with events elsewhere in the Middle East. On the first anniversary of the Arab Spring, Egypt’s military leaders were still clinging to power, but Islamic groups had moved toward the forefront of the country’s politics.

A year earlier, a series of phone calls from Defense Secretary Robert Gates to Egyptian defense minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi had helped pave the way for Mubarak’s resignation. But Tantawi and other Egyptian military leaders with longstanding ties to the United States had proved no more willing to relinquish control of the country than Mubarak.

They had originally promised a presidential election in September but then put it off for an indefinite period. That fall, they put forward a new constitution that would grant the armed forces special privileges and protection from military control. In November, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians returned to Tahrir Square to demand that the military give way to civilian rule. The armed forces and police countered with a crackdown. Obama condemned the violence and supported the protesters' call for the military to give up power, thus distancing himself from Tantawi and the other generals. The military leadership increasingly blamed the United States for the country's turmoil; a month later, police raided the offices of three large American institutions supporting democratic change in Egypt.

At the beginning of 2012, Egypt completed the last of three rounds of elections for a new parliament, its first since the revolution. The results were striking, if not surprising: Islamist parties won more than 60 percent of the popular vote and a majority of seats. The Islamists were themselves divided, however; the moderate, well-organized Muslim Brotherhood took about 40 percent, while the extremely conservative Salafists garnered more than 20 percent. The Obama administration rushed to forge a working relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood; senior State Department officials and leading congressmen, such as Senator John Kerry, began to pay visits to its leaders, asking basic questions such as whether they would support the Camp David accords with Israel. They said they would.<sup>4</sup>

The Obama administration thus found itself obliged to pin its hopes for Egypt's political future not on a liberalizing military leadership, not on the secular elite or the young people who had taken to Tahrir Square a year earlier but on the ability of the Muslim Brotherhood, a force the United States had opposed for decades, to fend off the challenges of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt.

In his inaugural address, Obama had summarized his new policy of engagement by addressing America's adversaries. "We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist," he said. Iran was at the top of the list of countries for which these words were intended. But over the following three years, the offer of engagement had been first rejected by Iran and then all but abandoned in Washington.

Administration officials were displaying their own clenched fists.

By early 2012, the United States was seeking to weaken Iran through international economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, covert intelligence operations against its nuclear weapons program and support for a new regime to replace Assad in Syria, Iran's closest ally. Obama's senior aides made little attempt to hide their animosity toward Iran's leaders. "Look at the decisions they've made," asserted Donilon. "They've basically taken a great people and a great civilization, and they've turned it into an isolated state." He was pleased with the role the Obama administration had played in the regime's difficulties. "We have succeeded in isolating, squeezing, putting pressure economically on them, and politically. And turned them into basically as isolated a place as they've ever been, certainly any time since the revolution in 1979."<sup>5</sup>

With Iran, Obama was in a dangerous race against time. He was trying to stave off the moment when Iran acquired nuclear weapons, an event that would probably prompt neighbors like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey to try to do the same. Obama was, moreover, also trying to avoid allowing Iran to get so close to nuclear capability that Israel might decide to launch an air strike, or so close that he himself might have to decide whether the United States should attack.

In late 2011, the Obama administration imposed new economic sanctions against Iran's petrochemical industry. Moreover, the United States managed to obtain much greater cooperation from allies for tighter sanctions to cut off Iran's access to the international banking system. At the beginning of 2012, the European Union took the first steps toward an embargo on oil from Iran, and Asian nations also seemed to be reducing their oil imports from Iran. The impact on Iran's economy was increasingly severe. The value of Iran's currency, the rial, was in deep decline; imported consumer goods, such as the iPhone, increased in price by more than 30 percent. The dispute increasingly took on a military dimension; Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and warned that the United States should not send an aircraft carrier nearby.<sup>6</sup>

In Syria, the Obama administration had overcome its reluctance, a half year earlier, to call for the ouster of Assad. By early 2012, Assad's forces had killed at least five thousand Syrians. The United States was working actively

to unify the opposition to the regime; it was enforcing severe economic sanctions on Syria and its leaders.

Still, the administration worked against Assad in the distinctive Obamian fashion. It rejected calls for the use of military force on behalf of the opposition. Obama was content, indeed eager, to let other countries, like Turkey, or other groups of countries, like the Arab League, take the front-line role against Assad. Just as in dealing with Libya, he sought to avoid allowing the effort to replace a dictator being perceived as a mostly American operation.

In early January 2012, Assad rebuffed suggestions that he resign and promised to deal with the protests with an “iron hand.”<sup>7</sup> It seemed extremely unlikely that he would remain in power for another year.

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The stiffer China policy launched during Hillary Clinton’s visit to Hanoi in 2010 was not ephemeral. It marked a fundamental turning point, not just for dealing with China, but in the overall strategy and priorities of the Obama administration.

Since the early days of the administration, the Obamians had been talking about giving higher priority to Asia. (“We are reorienting our focus to Asia,” declared Denis McDonough, at a time when the United States still had nearly 200,000 troops engaged in two wars elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>) At first, the context was largely economic: the Obamians recognized not only that an increasing share of America’s trade was with Asia, but that much of the world’s economic growth was coming from Asia. With the 2010 dispute over China’s extensive claims in the South China Sea, however, the administration began to recognize that it needed to devote much greater attention to Asia in its military and strategic thinking, too. China’s neighbors—not only Vietnam, but American allies like Japan, South Korea and Australia—were growing concerned about China’s increasing military power. The risk was not that China would begin conquering other countries, but that without an American counterweight, China could intimidate the region; other nations, even major ones like Japan, might eventually fall under China’s sway. The Chinese leadership was growing ever more assertive; its mercantilist policies were hurting the economies of other nations; and the

Obama administration’s initial efforts at a working accommodation with Beijing had resulted mostly in bolder Chinese policies and demands.

For more than two years, the administration’s supposed new emphasis on Asia remained mostly in the realm of rhetoric. But in the fall of 2011, it began to take concrete form. That November, Obama traveled to Honolulu, Australia and Indonesia. As he did, the administration announced that the United States would begin deploying a contingent of 2,500 U.S. Marines to Australia, rotating them in and out every six months so that there would be a permanent American presence. At the same time, the Obama administration began to push for a new free-trade grouping, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would spur trade with many countries in Asia and its surroundings, but not, at the outset, with China. The following month, Clinton made a groundbreaking trip to Burma, the first such visit by any top-level American official in a half century.

Administration officials were quick to portray all these steps in strategic terms as part of what they characterized as America’s “pivot” to Asia. “The future of the United States is intimately intertwined with the future of the Asia-Pacific,” wrote Clinton in a magazine article published that fall. “A strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America’s global leadership.”<sup>9</sup>

The administration did not hide the fact that China’s growing assertiveness had prompted the new policy. The purpose was to let the world know that China’s growing power did not mean it would be able to dominate Asia, and that America’s budgetary problems did not mean that it would pull back from the region. “We are here to stay,” said Obama during his Asia trip.<sup>10</sup> Even before the deal to keep the Marines in Australia was made public, senior administration officials described it as a paradigm for future such arrangements elsewhere in Asia. “We’re looking at a number of other places where we can have other kinds of presence in Asia, and not a diminution at all,” said Donilon. He also noted that the United States was beginning to invest in new military capabilities that could neutralize China’s efforts to keep the U.S. Navy out of the waters near China and Taiwan.

The Obama administration’s ideas for Asia were not entirely new. It was following the example of George Shultz, Ronald Reagan’s secretary of state.

A decade after President Nixon's opening to China, Shultz had argued that the United States should not worry so much about a close relationship with Beijing and should instead give priority to its ties with allies like Japan and South Korea.

Administration officials insisted this had been their strategy at the very start of the administration. "We focused quite intensively on what has to be a fundamental in Asia, which has to be a restoration of our alliances," Donilon maintained. That was indeed a fair description of Obama's approach in 2011. But such claims glossed over Obama's first eighteen months in office, when he sought above all to conciliate Beijing. It hadn't worked.

America's relationship with Pakistan never recovered from the Bin Laden raid. As some Obama administration officials acknowledged, the fallout was much greater than they had anticipated. The very aspects of the operation that had helped make it a success—keeping it secret from Pakistan, choosing a commando raid rather than an air strike, being willing to risk outright military conflict if Pakistani forces resisted—made it, from the perspective of Pakistani military and intelligence leaders, a disaster. The raid seemed to show that the United States could do what it wanted inside Pakistan, with or without the assent of its leaders. It also exposed the inherent contradictions in the ties between America and Pakistan—above all, the fact that it was hard to say whether the two countries were friends or enemies.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2011, the Obama administration made a series of attempts to repair the damage. In late November, however, an American air strike killed approximately twenty-five Pakistani soldiers at an outpost near Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. U.S. officials explained that the incident resulted from a series of fog-of-war mistakes: the Pakistani forces had supposedly fired on American and Afghan forces in the belief that they were the Taliban, and Americans were said to have countered by calling in air strikes, believing in turn they had been fired on by the Taliban.

In response, Pakistan ordered the CIA to leave an air base from which it was conducting drone operations and restricted the flow of supplies across Pakistan to NATO forces in Afghanistan. For a time, the United States suspended all drone operations from Pakistan. The consequences extended beyond the operational to the strategic: Pakistani officials announced that

they were reevaluating the country's entire relationship with the United States. American officials conceded that ties to Pakistan had reached the point of fundamental change. The United States could no longer count on being able to put American soldiers or CIA agents into Pakistan or to launch drone and air attacks from its soil. In turn, Pakistan could no longer count on billions of dollars in American aid.

Pakistan already possessed more than one hundred nuclear weapons and was producing still more. During Obama's first weeks in office, Bruce Riedel, the South Asia expert who had worked in his presidential campaign, warned Obama about the danger of nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands in a place like Pakistan—a prospect Obama had called "scary." The killing of Bin Laden more than two years later was Obama's greatest triumph. However, the president had to hope that it did not set off a chain of events that could lead to a nuclear-armed Islamic fundamentalist state in Pakistan.

Throughout 2011, the governments of the United States and Iraq had negotiated over what would happen at the end of the year. The status-of-forces agreement establishing the legal basis for the American troop presence in Iraq, signed in the final year of the Bush administration, would run out in December. The Pentagon was eager for a new agreement that would keep some U.S. forces there. In the middle of the year, Defense Department officials spoke of maintaining a contingent of about ten thousand troops at a couple of U.S. bases in Iraq. By the fall, American officials scaled back the numbers to five thousand.<sup>11</sup>

But the negotiations broke down because of lack of enthusiasm, first from the Iraqis and then also from the Obamians. Iraqi officials were reluctant to sign a new agreement in which they would, necessarily, have had to grant immunity for the U.S. troops. "Dammit, make a decision," Defense Secretary Leon Panetta exclaimed on a visit to Baghdad in July. Eventually, Obama and his aides decided that if Iraq didn't want a residual American military presence, they didn't either.

U.S. military leaders had worried about the impact of a complete withdrawal from Iraq. But in political terms, making a clean break was much better for Obama than leaving some American troops in the country.

Getting out of Iraq had been the central theme in the campaign that brought him to the White House. He had reaffirmed that commitment within weeks of taking office. In mid-2010, he had announced the formal end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq, declaring that “it’s time to turn the page.” Obama was preparing to run for reelection in 2012. Any decision to extend the American troop presence there would be portrayed as a violation of these promises and of the “dumb-war” views on which Obama’s career in national politics had been based. Furthermore, it would also raise questions about whether Obama would really withdraw American forces from Afghanistan by 2014, as he had also promised. When Iraqi officials resisted the American requests for a new status-of-forces agreement that would allow some troops to stay on, Obama decided not to treat it as a rebuff. At a White House ceremony in October, he said proudly that all the American forces in Iraq would be home for the holidays.

The war in Iraq had lasted more than eight years and cost nearly a trillion dollars. Approximately 4,500 Americans had been killed and another 32,000 had been wounded. With the end of 2011 approaching, both Biden and Panetta paid visits to Iraq to commemorate the impending American departure. “Those lives were not lost in vain,” said Panetta. “They gave birth to an independent, free and sovereign Iraq.” The end came quietly. At dusk on Saturday, December 17, 2011, the last American forces, a contingent of about 500 troops at what the U.S. military had called Contingency Operating Base Adder near Nasiriyah in southern Iraq, gathered into a convoy of 110 vehicles. The convoy rolled through the desert and, at 2:30 a.m. the following morning, crossed the border into Kuwait. The facility the Americans left behind was renamed Imam Ali Air Base.<sup>12</sup>

On January 5, 2012, Obama traveled across the Potomac River to the Pentagon to unveil a new document, the Defense Strategic Guidance that would set forth American priorities in military strategy defense spending in the coming years. Appearing before reporters in the Pentagon briefing room, Obama was clearly in early campaign mode, setting forth themes that he could use over the following months. “We’ve ended our war in Iraq. We’ve decimated al-Qaeda’s leadership,” he intoned. “We’ve delivered justice to Osama bin Laden, and we’ve put that terrorist network on the path to

defeat. . . . Now, we’re turning the page on a decade of war.”<sup>13</sup> Most people assumed the 2012 campaign would be about economics, but Obama seemed to be exploring whether he could make national security a key part of his campaign message.

The eight-page paper released that day described in detail a series of far-reaching changes in defense strategy. They had been prompted in part by previously announced budget cutbacks of \$450 billion over the following decade. The army would be cut back from 570,000 to 490,000, the document said. The United States would depart from the longstanding policy of having enough troops and resources to fight and win two wars in two different parts of the world at the same time; instead, the goal would be to be able to win one war while merely fending off and frustrating the ambitions of an adversary in another theater. The new strategy enshrined Obama’s recent announcement of a “pivot” to Asia. “We will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region,” it said. While defense spending as a whole would be reduced, there would be no cutbacks in Asia. Within days, administration officials let it be known that they planned to withdraw two U.S. army brigades from Europe.

Obama and the new Pentagon document glossed over the biggest change of all, a virtually complete reversal of the views espoused only three years earlier. In 2009, when Obama took office, the Pentagon was swept up in transition to the new doctrine of counterinsurgency, the strategy General David Petraeus had brought to the war in Iraq. Army leaders and troop were being hurriedly trained in how to develop close ties at the village level and how to protect the local population through good works in order to win its loyalty against an insurgent force like the Taliban. Obama had himself embraced the strategy when he sent more troops to Afghanistan in 2009, not realizing what counterinsurgency would mean in time and money.

By 2012, the idea was all but abandoned. Afghanistan had been the graveyard for American counterinsurgency, much as it had earlier been the graveyard for the military aspirations of the British and the Soviets. Once the Bin Laden raid succeeded, Obama quickly shifted to an emphasis on counterterrorism rather than counterinsurgency. In the Pentagon’s revised strategy in 2012, “counterterrorism and irregular warfare” was listed at the very top of the list of missions for the U.S. armed forces. Counterinsurgency was all but

written off. After Iraq and Afghanistan, the document said, the United States would turn to “non-military means” for handling problems of instability. American forces would “retain” and “refine” the lessons they had learned, the Pentagon said. It then added, in italics: “However, U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”<sup>14</sup>

In short, Obama had succeeded in changing the Pentagon and its strategy, but only after starting down the wrong path and then reversing course.

The drones and the targeted killing did not stop. The United States continued to hold prisoners without trial. The policy of rendition remained in effect. Just as many of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms didn’t become permanent until the Eisenhower administration failed to do away with them, so, too, some of George W. Bush’s antiterrorism policies didn’t seem like permanent changes until they were perpetuated by Obama.

The prison at Guantánamo remained open, just as it had been three years earlier. Two days after his inauguration, Obama had signed the executive order requiring that the facility be closed within one year—that is, by the beginning of 2010. But his efforts were blocked by a series of obstacles: congressional actions, court decisions and the general apathy of an American public that had once treated closing Guantánamo as a matter of urgency. Sometimes, bringing about change takes more than a president.

## Conclusion

In evaluating Obama and his foreign policy, the question of change has several different dimensions. How much did the Obama administration really change from the George W. Bush administration? How much did Obama’s generation of Democrats change from the Democrats of the Clinton administration? How much did the Obama administration as a whole change during its time in office? And how much did the president change his own ideas and strategy?

Many people now respond to the first question by claiming Obama was not much different from Bush. That answer comes from both political directions: Liberals mourn the fact that there has not been more change; Republicans such as Dick Cheney gloat about how little of the Bush legacy has been undone. Yet this perception of continuity is too simplistic: Clearly, Obama has *not* been the same as Bush. Indeed, in a few instances Obama has been more hawkish. He vastly expanded both the use of drones for targeted killings and the areas where these drone killings are carried out. Moreover, he was less collaborative and more unilateral than Bush in dealing with Pakistan: Bush’s approach was to inform and work with Pakistani leaders; it was Obama who achieved the success of the Bin Laden raid.

More generally, however, the Obama administration relied on multilateralism in its foreign policy where the Bush administration did not, at least during Bush’s tumultuous first term. It is hard to imagine George W. Bush intervening in Libya in the fashion that Obama did. Under Bush, the United States either would have spurned the British and French appeals to act against Gaddafi or, if he decided to join them, would have dominated the

military operation (and thus paid most of the costs for it). That was how America had always done it since World War II.

Still, on quite a few issues, the continuities from Bush to Obama were striking. Certainly in the field of counterterrorism, Obama changed American policies far less than had been expected when he took office. Few could have predicted, for example, that the prison at Guantánamo would remain open three years into Obama's presidency, or that he would continue so many of Bush's other policies, including targeted killings, rendition and warrantless surveillance.

Why is it that Democratic presidential candidates hold out the prospect of a new American foreign policy, and yet often wind up with ones that are not fundamentally different from the Republicans'? It is worth keeping in mind that during presidential campaigns, both Democrats and Republicans always have an interest in emphasizing the differences between the two parties. Both parties seek to frame foreign policy issues in simplistic ways that will arouse their own supporters. The candidates tend to talk less about the policies of their opponents that they will continue. Moreover, people tend to remember the parts of a candidate's message they like and ignore the parts they don't.

Americans tend to assume that a change in administration represents a wholesale change in personnel and viewpoints. But that is not always true, and especially not in the case of the Obama administration. The new Democratic president kept in place Robert Gates, Bush's secretary of defense. John Brennan, Obama's principal adviser on counterterrorism, had been one of the principal aides to Bush's CIA director at the time the prison at Guantánamo Bay was set up. Stuart Levey, the point man in Obama's efforts to impose economic sanctions on Iran and North Korea, was the same Treasury Department official who had first devised these policies under Bush. Obama appointed David Petraeus, who led the surge in Iraq that the Democrats opposed, to be commander of American forces in Afghanistan and then his CIA director.

Even when the personnel do change with a new administration, that does not automatically produce a change in outlook or assumptions about the world. It would be hard to argue that there was a profound difference in views about America's continuing leadership role in the world between Bush's outgoing national security adviser and secretary of state, Stephen

Hadley and Condoleezza Rice, and their successors, James Jones and Hillary Clinton. Hadley and Clinton had known each other for years; they'd gone to law school together. As secretary of state for Bush, Rice had appointed Jones to be a special envoy in the Middle East.

In short, the people Obama appointed and the assumptions they carried with them into office were far less conducive to far-reaching change than the rhetoric of the Obama presidential campaign had led people to anticipate.

During the course of his first three years in the White House, Obama altered some of his own ideas and strategies. His calm demeanor (not to mention the reluctance of any president to admit to reversing course) obscured this reality. In 2009, Obama was determined to avoid sounding like George W. Bush. As one part of that effort, he clearly de-emphasized the importance of promoting democracy overseas, both in his speeches and in dealing with countries like Iran and China. His acknowledged model in foreign policy was the realist approach pursued under President George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft. But Obama gradually changed his ideas and rhetoric during his second year, so that by the time of the Arab Spring of 2011, Obama was openly espousing the importance of democracy and political freedom abroad. It is difficult to believe George H. W. Bush would have told Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down, now rather than later, and to yield to protesters for democracy in the streets. In the case of Libya, Obama sent out military power on a mission justified on humanitarian grounds, not for reasons of a compelling national interest. Scowcroft, the quintessential realist, openly disagreed with Obama.

The president also changed his military strategy in a fundamental way, so that the Obama of 2011 was not the same as the Obama of 2009. At the start of his administration, Obama bought heavily into the strategy of counterinsurgency that had seemed to work for Petraeus in Iraq. He ordered troops to Afghanistan in early 2009 and then more at the end of the year, hoping to win support of the Afghan people in a way that would turn the war. At that time, Obama rejected the arguments of some officials, including Vice President Joe Biden, to rely more heavily on a counterterrorism strategy—using fewer ground troops and relying more heavily on special operations forces, drones and missiles to attack al-Qaeda.



In mid-2011, however, Obama shifted in Afghanistan toward counterterrorism, the approach that succeeded in killing Osama bin Laden in Pakistan and, five months later, Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen. The Obama team minimized the significance of this change in military strategy, probably because calling attention to it would have raised questions about whether he should have sent so many more American troops to Afghanistan in the first place.

The senior positions in the Obama administration changed hands often, too. The personnel moves were so gradual that few people bothered to put them all together, but the result was that by the end of Obama's third year in office, only one of the top eight officials in the government's foreign policy apparatus was in the same job as at the start of the administration: Hillary Clinton.<sup>1</sup> By way of comparison, after three years in the Bush administration, all eight of these same positions were filled by the same people as at the start of the administration. The point is not that personnel stability is inherently good. In the Bush years, experience sometimes obscured the ability to see what was new, and long tenure in office sometimes led to stubbornness in acknowledging what went wrong. Rather, it is to say that, in setting his foreign policy, Obama was often adjusting to different cabinet-level advisers.

By contrast, there was considerably more continuity in Obama's inner circle. Just as he had since 2007, in the early stages of his presidential campaign, Obama continued to rely upon Denis McDonough to advise him and make sure that what he wanted in foreign policy would be carried out; and he continued to depend on Ben Rhodes to craft his message and speeches, the themes, narratives and justifications underlying his foreign policy. The one major change in the Obama inner circle brought in from the 2008 campaign was the departure of Obama's Senate aide Mark Lippert, who was forced out in White House infighting.

How did the Obama administration differ from the *Clinton* administration? Did the Democrats change their views of the world from the 1990s to the Obama era? The answer to that is in some ways as interesting as the more frequent comparison between Barack Obama and George W. Bush.

At the working levels of government, Obama's team included many of the same foreign policy hands who had worked under Clinton. These

Clinton alumni were confronting a changed world, one that the younger Obamians took for granted but the Clinton alumni did not. "The change in the media environment is dramatic—it's had a profound impact," said Tony Blinken, who worked on the National Security Council under Clinton and was Biden's national security adviser under Obama. "In the Clinton administration, we basically stopped work every night at six thirty to watch the national network news. I don't think many people do that anymore. And the other thing everyone did back then was, you got up in the morning and you rushed to see what was above the fold on a physical copy of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and maybe the *LA Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, which no one does anymore, either. Instead, we're on an intravenous feed of cable and the Internet and blogs, everything else."

Such a change may at first seem inconsequential, but Blinken argued that it has had a profound impact. "You have to resist the temptation to be totally reactive to everything you're hearing minute to minute—so that you're not in an environment where, the minute something pops up on *Morning Joe*, and you haven't figured out a solution by the end of it, you're a failure," he said. He said one of Obama's strengths was that he didn't get "distracted by the daily or hourly turbulence."<sup>2</sup>

All the other changes from Clinton to Obama were dwarfed by the increasing lack of resources. Virtually all the Clinton administration officials who had returned under Obama pointed out that they had less money available to do what they hoped to do overseas. When the Obama administration chose to turn over most of the responsibility for military operations in Libya to its allies, one factor was money. When Obama decided in mid-2011 to begin bringing troops home from Afghanistan sooner rather than later, again one of the reasons cited was financial. The only policy area where a ranking Obama administration official said he did not feel affected by tighter economic constraints was counterterrorism.<sup>3</sup>

During the Arab Spring, when I asked an Obama administration official about the role that Saudi Arabia was playing, the first response was to say, not unexpectedly, that Saudis were trying in country after country to block the movement toward democratic change. But the official's next observation went to economics: "They sure do have a lot of money to throw around."<sup>4</sup> Another administration official, discussing the competition between the

United States and China for influence in Asia, pointed out that over the next few years China is likely to spend tens of billions of dollars in investment and aid to Indonesia, while the United States will spend in the tens of millions. The second official used virtually the same wording as the first, substituting the Chinese in Asia for the Saudis in the Middle East: *They sure do have a lot of money to throw around.* It was the sort of comment that, throughout the last half of the twentieth century, others had made about the United States.

The change in America's economic position gave rise to the most significant difference between the Bill Clinton era and the Obama era: a shift in views on America's role in the world. The words the Americans used in the 1990s were essentially an updated version of what their predecessors had used since World War II: They spoke of America's leadership role; the United States was the indispensable nation, the unchallenged superpower. Obama's rhetoric was much more guarded. He tended to speak of that post-World War II role either as something that was passing away or as something that might be revived through economic changes and renovation. When Obama said in speeches that "the nation we care most about building is our own," the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan and the postwar reconstruction of Japan got the message.

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If a single word captured the Obamians' view of their overall strategy in dealing with the world, from the very start of the administration, it was the concept of "rebalancing." They repeated this word again and again in private conversations, in official briefings and in written documents such as their National Security Strategy.

The Obamians used "rebalancing" in a variety of contexts. In general, they said, America should rebalance its priorities toward a greater emphasis on domestic concerns. In foreign policy, America needed to rebalance from an overreliance on the military toward diplomacy and other means of statecraft. The United States also needed to rebalance away from a preoccupation with the Middle East and toward the prosperous region of East Asia. In economics, Obama and his aides spoke of the need to rebalance the international economy, the global markets, the distribution of imports and exports, the values of various countries' currencies. In meetings with Chinese president Hu Jintao, whose government held ever growing foreign exchange

reserves, the need for rebalancing was at the heart of Obama's message. "I think we've been trying to make this case to the American people and the world about how we're going to get beyond these wars and we're going to rebalance," explained Ben Rhodes. He was repeating, in a more colloquial fashion, a sentence from the administration's National Security Strategy.<sup>5</sup> In more elegant language, the Obamians were saying that America and the world were out of whack.

To some experienced Washington politicians, the Obamian concept of rebalancing seemed laudable but not exactly right. The word itself seemed to suggest simply a shifting of money and resources from overseas back home—such as, for example, taking \$1 billion from the war in Afghanistan and shifting it to pay for rebuilding this nation's transportation system.

"Well, I don't know that that's what he [Obama] is doing, just redirecting resources," said Nancy Pelosi, who was as much in favor of doing so as Obama. She pointed out that the overall resources available to spend were greatly diminished, too. The pie was shrinking. "It's not a question of whether we're going to take the money from that place and spend it over here—I mean, we don't have the money," said Pelosi. She stopped and chuckled. "We had an old expression on the House Appropriations Committee—'It's not the price, it's the money.' We don't have the money. We just don't have the money."<sup>6</sup>

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Did the Obamians' outlook mean that they believed in the idea of America's "decline," as their opponents sometimes claimed? "The ultimate purpose of [Obama's] foreign policy is to make America less hegemonic, less arrogant, less dominant," wrote Charles Krauthammer during Obama's first year. "In a word, it is a foreign policy designed to produce American decline—to make America essentially one nation among many."<sup>7</sup>

Such critiques fail to take account of facts or arguments that don't square with the theory. If Obama's foreign policy was "less hegemonic, less arrogant," as indeed it was, that was because the Obama administration viewed humility as a way to win much greater support from other countries, in a way that would help stave off decline and, indeed, increase American power. The impact of the Iraq War had been such that foreign leaders in countries like France and Germany were unwilling to collaborate with the United

States overseas—and found that even when they wanted to do so, they faced determined and vociferous public opposition at home. That was the situation Obama's less "arrogant" approach was designed to change—as a way of increasing America's power, not reducing it.

"This is the contrary of decline: It's about figuring out, in a more complicated world, with new constraints, how to maximize our power, and that's what we've done," asserted Blinken. Donilon went a step further, arguing that the Obama administration had reversed the decline that had occurred during the Bush years. "We came into office at a period of very significant diminution of American influence, prestige and power in the world," he asserted in an interview. "And our principal strategic goal was the restoration of that position."

The related question was whether America *was*, in fact, in decline. Was its international strength plummeting not because the Obama administration wanted that to happen, but as a result of broad international trends, such as the rise of China and India and the erosion of America's financial position?

The Obama administration insisted otherwise, and on this point many of its domestic critics agreed. Again and again over the past several years, officials from both political parties have repeated the same arguments: The United States is still by far the world's leading military power. It continues to have the world's largest economy; even if China catches up within a couple of decades, the United States will still have, in per capita terms, a GNP vastly larger than China's. America's colleges and universities are still the destination of choice for students in China and elsewhere in Asia. The United States still has abundant resources, advanced technology and a knack for innovation beyond that of any other country. America's ingenuity, its inventiveness, its general openness to ideas and people, always enable it to overcome adversity.

Indeed—so the argument goes—warnings of declining American power have been a recurrent theme in modern American life. They come up every few years and then vanish again, in cyclical fashion. Americans worried about declining power at the end of the 1940s, after the Soviet Union acquired the atomic bomb and the Chinese Communist Party came to power; again in the late 1950s, when the Soviets launched Sputnik; and then during

the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the oil shocks of the 1970s and the growth of Japanese economic power in the 1980s.

All of these points are valid. Predictions of American decline have repeatedly been wrong in the past, and the United States has often demonstrated an extraordinary ability to adapt and innovate. Still, that does not answer whether the United States will be able to revive itself and fortify its international position now as it has in the past. Those who argue that there has been no decline sometimes ignore or gloss over the objective fact of America's diminishing economic power and resources, compared with other countries. The Obama administration has been able to demonstrate once again America's military strengths and to increase its diplomatic influence, but it has far less in economic and financial clout than any administration for decades.

There is one other striking difference from the past: Never before have America's leaders found it so necessary to proclaim so often, both at home and around the world, that America is *not* in decline.

After three years in office, the Obama administration could point to several successes in its foreign policy. The principal one was in counterterrorism, where Obama's overall strategy and the specific choices he made had clearly weakened al-Qaeda's leadership and capabilities. He'd managed to smooth over the animosities with Europe that had been aroused by the Iraq War. By the end of 2011, he had withdrawn American troops from Iraq.

On other goals, he achieved only middling success. He wanted to reorient American policy toward Asia, yet the continuing needs of the war in Afghanistan, which he chose to expand, made it considerably more difficult to achieve this goal. He sought to restore America's standing in the Middle East, but the results were limited; critics remained cynical about American motives, because of the continuing U.S. links to undemocratic regimes in places like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Obama administration had hoped that a conciliatory approach to China would produce a better working relationship, but had to make adjustments after finding that China was emboldened by America's eagerness to avoid conflict. Obama worked hard to forge a relationship with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, hoping that he could emerge as a leader in his own right with a degree of independence from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin—only to discover in the fall of 2011

that Putin reinstalled himself as president and Russia's unchallenged leader for another twelve years.

There were notable failures, too, in what had been some of Obama's highest priorities at the time he took office. He wanted to bring about significant movement toward a Middle East peace settlement. Yet after three years, his efforts had not yet achieved any substantial change. So, too, Obama wanted to induce Iran to stop its nuclear weapons program and to persuade North Korea to give up the nuclear weapons it already had. Through the end of 2011, he had succeeded in obtaining tighter economic sanctions, but had made little if any headway toward the ultimate goal of persuading the leaders of Iran and North Korea to change course.

Indeed, the events in Libya may well have taught the North Koreans and Iranians a very different lesson: If you give up your nuclear program, you are more vulnerable to military attack. It seems extremely unlikely that the United States and its allies would have bombed nuclear-armed North Korea the way they did Gaddafi's denuclearized Libya, even if North Korea was threatening to kill more civilians than Gaddafi ever did. Kim Jong-il and his associates got the message quickly. Within days after the allied attack on Libya had begun, a senior North Korean official said the agreement Gaddafi had entered into in 2003, giving up his nuclear program in exchange for improved relations with the West, had been a trick. The deal with Libya had been "an invasion tactic to disarm the country," the North Korean official said.<sup>9</sup>

Eight years ago, at the end of my book *Rise of the Vulcans*, I asked the question whether the Bush administration's venture into Iraq in 2003 represented "the outer limits of the expansion of American power and ideals." The answer to that question was clearly yes. America discovered that its goal of transforming the Middle East, through the application of unilateral military power, was well beyond its reach.

Does this mean that the Obamians represent the opposite end of a swinging pendulum? If the Bush administration erred by overestimating America's power, could it be that the Obamians are, conversely, underestimating it?

To gauge accurately what power America does or does not possess is one of the essential elements of foreign policy. In the past, both Democrats and

Republicans have sometimes gotten it wrong. Iraq provided a classic example, not once but twice. Before the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Democratic leaders underestimated America's military capabilities. Before the 2003 Iraq War, Republican leaders overestimated them. These judgments seem undeniable, apart from whether one believed in the morality or legitimacy of either conflict.

I don't believe the Obamians represent just another swing of the pendulum, for two reasons. First, its own policies have added up to centrism, not to the mirror image of the Bush administration. Obama's use of drone attacks and his dispatch of more troops to Afghanistan, for instance, seem to have dispelled—at least for now—the decades-old Republican stereotypes that Democrats are weak on national security or unwilling to use force.

More important, I think the entire model of a pendulum doesn't fit. The Obamians don't represent the outer limits of anything. Future presidents of both parties will face the same underlying realities of limited money and diminishing American sway over an increasing number of new powers. The Vulcans of the Bush era reflected a belief in overwhelming American power, one that was linked to the years immediately after the end of the Cold War. The Obamians could not revive that belief, even if they had wanted to do so, and neither will Obama's successors. Rather, Obama's time in office has marked the beginning of a new era in America's relations with the rest of the world, an era when American primacy is no longer taken for granted.