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INTRODUCTION

Late in the afternoon of Tuesday, March 15, 2011, President Barack Obama gathered with members of his National Security Council in the Situation Room of the White House. In Libya, Colonel Moammar Gaddafi was on the verge of slaughtering the civilians and ragtag opposition forces that had risen up against him. The Obama administration was confronting an urgent decision: whether to send out American warplanes over Libya in an effort to stop him.

Over the previous two weeks, French president Nicolas Sarkozy and British prime minister David Cameron had been imploring Obama to join them in setting up a no-fly zone over Libya, one that would prevent Gaddafi from using planes and helicopters to shoot at defenseless Libyans on the ground. The private messages British and French officials were sending to Washington went further than their polite public statements. They pointed out that Britain and France had been acceding to American requests for help elsewhere in the world. They had sent troops to fight in Afghanistan in the face of considerable domestic opposition. They had joined with the United States in imposing progressively tougher economic sanctions against North Korea and Iran. But Libya was in Europe’s own backyard, and the message from America’s closest European allies boiled down to this: We need you on this one.¹

The National Security Council session opened with an intelligence briefing: Gaddafi’s forces are now advancing rapidly eastward across the country, beating back the opposition. They are now approaching Ajdabiya, the last major city before Benghazi, and will probably reach there within a few days. Benghazi is Libya’s second-largest city, the home base

for opposition to the regime in Tripoli; that had been true in the past and was certainly true in Gaddafi's Libya. Intelligence officials predicted that Gaddafi, whose army had been rounding up and killing civilians elsewhere, would be at his most brutal in Benghazi.

Next, Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, laid out in detail the plans for a no-fly zone. That was what the British and French had asked for, and the March 15 meeting had been called to make a decision on that request. Obama's own cabinet was divided: Defense Secretary Robert Gates had been opposed to military action, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had been in favor.

But Obama suddenly took the deliberations in a new direction. He asked Mullen: "Will this no-fly zone stop the scenario we just heard about?" He was referring to the predictions of a possible bloodbath in Benghazi. No, replied Mullen. It could effectively take Libya's air force out of action, but Gaddafi would still have more than enough tanks and other heavy equipment on the ground to continue what he was doing.

Then why, asked the president, are we focusing on a no-fly zone? "This notion that we're going to put some planes in the air to fly over a massacre just doesn't make a lot of sense," he said. "We could feel really good about ourselves, on the right side of history, and the people would still get killed."

"I want more options," Obama concluded. The administration knew it needed to act quickly. The British and French were already pressing the UN Security Council for a resolution supporting a no-fly zone; if the United States didn't join them, it could be isolated, humiliated or blamed for inaction and any ensuing massacre.

It was late afternoon, and Obama said he had to leave. He and the First Lady were about to host an annual White House dinner for Combatant Commanders (many of America's senior military leaders) and their spouses. But Obama announced he wanted to reconvene the National Security Council later that night to hear what else he might do besides an ineffective no-fly zone.

The Pentagon was not caught unprepared. Officials there had begun looking at various plans for military action in Libya since early in the

month, although the detailed planning had flagged a bit when Pentagon officials noticed Gates arguing in public against American involvement. National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon had already reviewed some of the plans. The possibilities had included everything from putting in ground forces to a no-fly zone to what some in the White House dubbed the "Dunkirk option"—sending ships to bring people out of Libya.

Obama's dinner began at seven p.m. He did not linger; the NSC meeting reconvened at nine. This time, he was presented with a range of military options. One was to use no American force at all, but simply to provide intelligence and other support for the French and British. Another was the no-fly zone. The third was to go beyond the no-fly zone by sending out planes to strike at Libyan military targets on the ground in a way that would stop their advance toward Benghazi.

They went around the table, debating the alternative approaches. Gates again voiced his reservations. Clinton was out of the country and not at the table, but had made her views known in advance. Finally, the president chose the third military option. Speaking to United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice, he said, "I want to call everyone's bluff up in New York. Go in tomorrow morning and say that we're not going to support this resolution for a no-fly zone, we're going to redo it to authorize the use of 'all necessary measures'"—a euphemism for military force—"to protect civilians." And, Susan, you have to basically say, "That's the only thing we're going to support, because that's the only thing that's going to make a difference."

Obama's decision was momentous. He had sent American troops into war before—lots of them—to Afghanistan. But this was the first time he would send out American forces to initiate a new military conflict, one that was not already being waged at the time he took office. Obama was, moreover, engaging in humanitarian intervention: He was using force for the avowed purpose of protecting lives in a place that most officials acknowledged was not itself of compelling strategic interest to the United States; America's only arguable strategic interest on this issue lay in maintaining strong relationships with close allies who were supporting the United States elsewhere in the world.

What Obama did two days later was even more striking. After the Security Council approved the American proposal authorizing “all necessary measures” against Gaddafi, he called Cameron and Sarkozy and worked out what his own aides called a deal: At the start of the military campaign, the United States would use its unique military capabilities—the advanced planes, missiles and precision-guided munitions it has in greater numbers and with higher levels of technology than any other country—to demolish not only Libya’s air defenses, but other military targets on the ground. Then, after a few days, the United States would step back and leave it to the British, French and other allies to continue the military campaign on their own. America would provide what the military calls ISR—intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. The rest would be up to others.

Less than forty-eight hours later, as Libyan forces were already on the outskirts of Benghazi, the United States and its allies launched what was known as Operation Odyssey Dawn: More than a hundred Tomahawk cruise missiles rained down on targets along the Libyan coastline, striking radar installations, air defense batteries and anything else that might be used against allied warplanes over Libya.² Immediately afterward, American planes struck again and again at tanks, armored vehicles, heavy artillery and other armor and weaponry. Gaddafi’s forces were suddenly stripped of their principal advantage over the opposition.

There was no massacre in Benghazi. The rebel forces held the city. But the civil war was just starting. After the first few days, Obama kept American forces out of the combat, despite occasional British and French appeals for the United States to rejoin the air campaign.

Obama’s decisions on Libya encapsulated, all at once, the two most distinctive aspects of his foreign policy.

First, Obama was not squeamish about employing American military power. His actions in the White House belied the stereotypes of weakness that Republicans have tried to pin on Democratic presidents and presidential candidates for four decades: that they are averse to the use of force.

In Libya, Obama decided to take stronger military action than U.S. allies had proposed. In Afghanistan, he greatly increased the American military presence, sending out more than 50,000 additional troops in his first year in

office. In the war against al-Qaeda, he vastly stepped up the use of drones and special operations, such as the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Meanwhile, in the realm of ideas, Obama took the occasion of his reception of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 to deliver a stunning defense of the concept of “just war,” saying specifically that, as American president, he could not be Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr.

All of this was surprising to many Democrats, who had chosen Obama for the Democratic nomination in no small part because of his opposition to the war in Iraq. For them, Obama turned out to be the peace candidate who wasn’t. Sometimes, as with the surge of forces to Afghanistan, Obama’s willingness to use military power garnered more support from Republicans than from Democrats.

But Obama’s actions were also disconcerting to the Republicans, who had trouble figuring out a consistent line of attack against the president. During Obama’s first year, former vice president Dick Cheney had portrayed him as weak. In Obama’s second year, Cheney began arguing that the Democratic president represented in many ways a continuation of George W. Bush’s administration. In the third year, after the drone killing of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, Cheney praised the operation, but called upon Obama to apologize for having supposedly accused the Bush team of overreacting to the September 11 attacks. Similarly, while running for the Republican presidential nomination, Newt Gingrich at first upbraided Obama for failing to establish a no-fly zone in Libya; then, after Obama did so and went even further, Gingrich said he would not have intervened at all.

Secondly, Libya also illustrated the other salient feature of Obama’s foreign policy: his continuing effort to recast the United States’ role in the world in a way that fit America’s more limited resources. No other president since World War II had entered into a military campaign quite like the one in Libya, in which Obama helped start the operation and then willingly, indeed insistently, handed off the next six months of work to its allies. Costs were certainly a factor. For years, American politicians had been talking about the importance of “burden sharing” with its allies, but usually in the past, this came down to asking other countries to help pay for American-dominated operations. Obama went well beyond that.

In general, Obama turned out to be far less wedded than his predecessors

to the idea of an enduring American primacy or hegemony in the world. Since World War II, American leaders had tended to take for granted the fact that U.S. military and economic power gave it the ability to shape the course of events around the globe. This was true of Democratic presidents as well as Republicans. It was Jimmy Carter who first declared that America had a strategic influence in the Persian Gulf; it was the Clinton administration that proclaimed the United States to be the world's "indispensable nation."

Like other leaders of both parties, Obama continued to say that America was the most powerful nation on earth. He, too, spoke of America's leadership role in the world. But in his speeches, Obama concentrated on other themes that hinted at a more modest American foreign policy than in the past. One theme was that it was time for the United States to focus on rebuilding its own nation at home, rather than other countries overseas. The other was the vague, subtle acknowledgment that America's dominance since World War II might not last forever, and that a new international order might be necessary.

"Our country has borne a special burden in global affairs," Obama said in one speech. "We have not always been thanked for these efforts, and we have at times made mistakes. But more than any other nation, the United States of America has underwritten global security for over six decades—a time that, for all its problems, has seen walls come down, and markets open, and billions lifted from poverty, unparalleled scientific progress and advancing frontiers."³

Obama voiced the same thought on other occasions, too. There was almost a wistful, elegiac tone to these passages. He made it sound as if this era was coming to an end.

Obama was the third Democratic president in a row to take office at the end of America's involvement in international conflict. Jimmy Carter took office after the end of the Vietnam War; Bill Clinton came to power following the Cold War. For Obama, it was the war in Iraq, still being fought as he came to the White House. George W. Bush's decision to launch that war had devastated America's image overseas.

At the time of his inauguration, Obama and his new foreign policy team faced a number of specific challenges: the continuing wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan, the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, the threat of terrorism from al-Qaeda, the rapid ascent of China, the downward spiral of America's relations with Russia. Obama wanted to close the prison holding detainees at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. He sought to smooth over relations with Middle Eastern leaders such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who had been upset by intermittent American efforts to promote democracy in his country.

More broadly, Obama needed to cope with the legacies of the two Georges—two men who, in different ways, cast shadows over Obama's foreign policy. One was Obama's immediate predecessor, George W. Bush. His war in Iraq and the widespread unpopularity of Bush at home and abroad meant that the new president faced a series of immediate problems. He needed not only to reexamine Bush's policies quickly, but to deal with expectations he would reverse nearly everything Bush had done, from the wars and antiterrorist practices to the prison at Guantánamo.

The second legacy was less obvious: that of George McGovern, the passionately antiwar senator who had won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972. McGovern had gone on to overwhelming defeat, but in the process, his campaign had solidified inside the Democratic Party an antiwar base that would influence American politics for several decades.

Democrats running for president after McGovern had to reckon with this antiwar constituency in one way or another. Some embraced it, while others ran as various kinds of centrist Democrats, "new Democrats" or "third way" Democrats to distinguish themselves from the party's left wing. The Republicans, meanwhile, knew that even when they were divided among themselves, they could always attack the Democrats by summoning forth the specter of McGovern, using his campaign to caricature the Democrats as pacifists who lacked pride in America.

I began this book after Obama's election in 2008 because I was particularly interested in following how Obama and his foreign policy team would deal with the world. I had written about their immediate predecessors; in an earlier book, *Rise of the Vulcans*, I traced the backgrounds and ideas of George W. Bush's foreign policy advisers. Obama's presidential campaign in 2007–2008 was waged in contradiction to the Bush team. Starting as a state senator in Illinois, he had called Bush's war in Iraq "dumb." He had joined

with antiwar forces within the Democratic Party at a time when most prominent Democratic leaders and candidates did not.

I wanted to see what happened when Obama and his new team took over after Bush. Could they bring about a new American relationship with the world, one that was less unilateral in approach and less reliant on American military power? I was interested in exploring the ideas, the assumptions and the people underlying Obama's foreign policy.

From the outset, the Obama foreign policy team differed from the one it replaced in several respects. At the cabinet level, officials did not have a common, shared history in dealing with the world, at least not by the standards of the Bush team. Indeed, they weren't all Democrats: Robert Gates, Obama's first defense secretary, was a holdover from the Bush administration, and James Jones, his first national security adviser, had spent his career in the military. Hillary Clinton, as secretary of state, had accumulated long experience in Democratic Party politics, but considerably less in the making of American foreign policy. Obama's first CIA director, Leon Panetta, similarly had a remarkably long track record in government but little in the field of intelligence or defense.

By virtually all accounts, the dominant influence on the Obama administration's foreign policy was the president himself. He was the main strategist. It was Obama's own ideas, sometimes changing over time, that have determined America's role in the world during his presidency.

But Obama has also relied heavily upon his own small, informal network of close aides. They did not hold cabinet-level positions, but in most cases worked closely with him during his 2008 presidential campaign. They had no previous experience in carrying out foreign policy at the State or Defense Departments, although some had worked on Capitol Hill. Obama installed these aides primarily on the National Security Council, and he often worked with and through them in formulating ideas and dealing with the foreign policy bureaucracies. I decided to focus primarily on this inner circle of aides not for the intrinsic importance of the jobs they held but because they were the ones who most closely share Obama's views, and were most involved in explaining his reasoning and enforcing his decisions. They provided a window into Obama's ideas and reasoning. It is these aides whom I call "the

Obamians." They were, in a sense, an extension of the president himself, the chief Obamian.

The Obamians self-consciously thought of themselves as a new generation in American foreign policy, and, indeed, in many ways they were. They were post-baby boomers, born in the 1960s and 1970s; they were infants or in elementary school (or, in one case, not yet born) during the Vietnam War. (Technically, demographers would classify Obama himself, born in 1961, as a late baby boomer, but few would question that he was of a different generation from Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, both fifteen years older.) The Obamians had not yet started their careers in government at the end of the Cold War. Obama had just turned thirty and graduated from law school at the time the Soviet Union collapsed, and other Obamians were in their teens or twenties. In deference to the Obamians' youthful approach and outlook, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates once quipped, "Jim [Jones] and Hillary and I have joked that we're of a different generation than those in the White House. While they're texting, we're on the cell phone or even a landline."⁴

The Obamians' formative experiences were the Iraq War and the financial crisis of 2008. Iraq brought forth an upsurge in anti-Americanism. The economic turmoil that had begun in Bush's final year—which led to America's growing unemployment and budget deficits—meant that the United States no longer had as much money to spend overseas as it had a decade earlier.

Obama's policies abroad are in many ways a clearer test of his own underlying ideas and choices than his policies at home. In most cases, he could not blame his foreign policy on Republican opposition or the need to make compromises—first because the Republicans have been so divided and scattershot in their views, but also because an American president doesn't need congressional support in foreign policy to the same extent as he does on taxes, budgets or health care. The reason for this is based in the Constitution: Congress has no role at all in the day-to-day execution of foreign policy and only a limited role in setting the overall direction. If anything, Obama increased presidential power over the Bush years, by choosing to carry out military action in Libya beyond the time limits set in the War Powers Resolution.

The one exception, in which Obama was clearly unable to achieve something because of congressional opposition, was his failure to close Guantánamo. But elsewhere—on Iraq and Afghanistan, policies toward Iran or China, drone attacks, killing Osama bin Laden, telling Hosni Mubarak to give up power in Egypt, intervening in Libya—the successes and failures were Obama's alone. In that sense, Obama's dealings with the rest of the world give a better sense of Obama himself, the people around him, his ideas and how he has (or has not) put them into effect.

The ultimate goal of this book is to look beyond the common perceptions and stereotypes about Obama's foreign policy. The conventional wisdom has varied: He's weak, he's strong; he's cautious, he's a risk taker; he's a continuation of Bush, he's a radical Kenyan anti-imperialist; he favors American decline, he's trying to preserve American power; he has made apology tours around the world, he has restored America's standing in the world. Beneath all of these slogans and epithets, there is a more complex reality—the blend of various events, people and ideas that made up America's relationship to the world in the Obama era. That is the story I seek to tell.

THE OBAMIANS

Prologue

Nine days after Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, on a rainy mid-November afternoon in Washington D.C., several hundred people filed into the spacious downstairs ballroom of the luxurious Willard Hotel. The occasion was ostensibly a book party, but those who attended treated it as a political event. It was the first appearance since the election of the Democrats who would be guiding American foreign policy for the next few years.

The authors were Kurt Campbell and James Steinberg, who had worked on Bill Clinton's foreign policy team and could be expected to return to government again under Barack Obama. Their new book, which had been well timed to come out immediately after the election, was called *Difficult Transitions: Foreign Policy Troubles at the Outset of Presidential Power*. It sketched out what a president-elect and an incoming administration should do in its first few months. "Think carefully before reversing predecessors' policy decisions," the book advised at one point. "Before moving precipitously, the new president should make sure that well-developed alternatives are ready and clearly thought out."¹ Obama and his aides would sometimes ignore that warning in their first months in office—as, for example, when the president announced immediately after his inauguration that he would close the Guantánamo Bay prison within a year.

Obama had visited Washington only once since Election Day. He and his former campaign advisers were still working in Chicago, beginning to put together his new administration. He had already named Congressman Rahm Emanuel as his White House chief of staff, but had not yet said whom he might choose for the top foreign policy positions. The leading candidate

for secretary of state was thought to be Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, who made no secret that he wanted the job. Or it might be a Republican senator, such as Richard Lugar or Chuck Hagel.

During a presidential transition Washington is a town of rumors and gossip, suspense and intrigue. Journalists and diplomats press to find out who will get which job. The young and ambitious want to know if they should put their names in, and if so, which influential people could put in a good word on their behalf. The lucky ones who get offered a position sometimes worry if they should hold out for something grander in rank. Those eager to make money try to calculate whether it would be better to take a job in the administration or to capitalize on new lobbying opportunities in the private sector. The conventional wisdom is that if you want to make money, it is better to work as a lobbyist in the first years of an administration and take an appointment later on, rather than serving in government first and then going off to lobby. (After you leave government, you're covered by conflict-of-interest rules that limit how much you can lobby.)

Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright introduced Steinberg and Campbell at the Willard. She recalled how she had known Steinberg since the two of them worked as foreign policy advisers to Michael Dukakis's 1988 presidential campaign, and how she and Campbell had taken part in Asian diplomatic gatherings in the 1990s. As he talked about the book and answered questions, Steinberg flashed his genial but controlled smile, the one that gave little away and conveyed the assurance that he was surprised by nothing, that everything was working out well. Campbell displayed his self-deprecating wit: When he mentioned a "new generation" taking over American foreign policy, he interrupted himself to say, "I'm not so new anymore." By Obama's standards, he wasn't.

The audience was listening, but with only one ear. The room was buzzing with gossip: Is Robert Gates going to stay on as Obama's defense secretary? What job will Bill Richardson be given—one in foreign or domestic policy? Why isn't Strobe Talbott at the book party today—does his absence mean he isn't interested in serving in the new administration? And the perennial question for the Democrats: What job will they give to Richard Holbrooke?

It was after the formal program had ended, when the audience had

retreated to the rear of the ballroom for wine, snacks and rumors, that the word began to spread from one cluster of people to another. Have you heard? Do you know what ABC and the *Washington Post* are reporting?

The answer: Obama just met with Hillary Clinton in Chicago. He's talking to her about the job of secretary of state.

Obama's appointment of Hillary Clinton did not by itself determine the course of his foreign policy. Over the following years, Clinton's role and influence within the administration's internal decision making would be a work in progress—sometimes immense, sometimes less than she would have liked. She would handle most of the duties of secretary of state in admirable fashion and would, in the process, greatly increase her own standing in the Democratic Party, particularly with those who had originally supported Obama and opposed her in 2008.

Nevertheless, the decision to give her the job at State had implications that extended beyond Clinton herself. It was of profound significance for Obama's grassroots supporters, for perceptions of his new administration, for the Democratic Party and for the underlying politics affecting Obama's foreign policy over the following four years. In all these respects, the Clinton appointment was nothing less than a bombshell.

The origins of Obama's decision to appoint Clinton are by now as familiar as they are, ultimately, vague in detail. The standard version goes like this: Obama called Clinton to Chicago on that day, nine days after the election, and surprised her by saying he would like to appoint her secretary of state. She at first didn't think he meant it. "She was floored when he opened the door to that," asserted John Podesta, the veteran Democrat who headed Obama's transition team. Podesta was close to the Clintons and served as an intermediary. When Obama persuaded her he was serious, she then balked for several reasons, saying she was tired, that she had to pay off her campaign debt, that Bill Clinton's foundation, fund-raising and other activities would pose too many difficulties. She told Obama she wouldn't do it, reconsidered overnight and called him the next morning to accept.²

These accounts of Clinton's appointment should be viewed as incomplete. There are plenty of reasons to think Clinton was less than "floored" by Obama's postelection summons to Chicago. Richard Holbrooke told a

friend he had learned in late October, before the election, that he would not be appointed secretary of state and that the job would probably go to Hillary Clinton instead. Podesta acknowledges that he began actively exploring the idea of the Clinton appointment in late October, in the two weeks before the election. The idea was “closely held,” he recalled, but he talked about it either with Obama himself or with Peter Rouse, an Obama aide. If they were discussing it, even quietly, and if Holbrooke (himself a Clinton ally) had picked up the information, it is virtually impossible to believe Hillary Clinton was completely in the dark.³

Indeed, the origins of the Clinton appointment appear to date back much earlier. Some accounts have Obama starting to talk about Clinton as secretary of state in the summer and early fall. Asked about these, Podesta said, “It’s possible that it’s true. It may have been in the back of his [Obama’s] mind. It was in the front of my mind. But we didn’t start talking about it until October.”⁴

What none of the standard accounts address is whether Clinton’s appointment was the result of a deal, implicit or explicit, reached between the two Democratic rivals at the end of their bitter battle for the nomination. Clinton had withdrawn her candidacy in June, rather than challenging Obama all the way to the Democratic National Convention. She had then dutifully campaigned for him in the general election. Had Obama agreed to let Clinton have a top job in his administration, if she wanted, in exchange for finally dropping her primary challenge and helping him in the race against John McCain? There is no evidence on this subject one way or the other; it is something perhaps only the two of them know. No transcript exists of the secret one-on-one meeting between Obama and Clinton at the Washington D.C. home of Senator Dianne Feinstein on June 5, 2008, two days before Clinton finally conceded the primary race to Obama.

For Obama’s most enthusiastic supporters, the Clinton appointment was difficult to accept. This was true both for rank-and-file volunteers and for some of Obama’s senior campaign aides. Obama’s grassroots supporters had of course spent months arguing to all who would listen that Clinton represented old thinking, the establishment, the Democratic Party elite—especially when it came to foreign policy, since the two candidates’ views on

domestic issues were not far apart. Now they learned, a couple of weeks after the election, that the State Department would be headed by the candidate they had so fervently denounced. Even worse, Clinton had her own network of friends and allies, one with deeper roots than Obama’s. “I thought we were rid of these people,” said one disappointed liberal Democrat who had long opposed the Clintons.

For some of the foreign policy experts who had advised Obama in the presidential campaign, the Clinton appointment was even more awkward. Under ordinary circumstances, some of them might have hoped to work in top jobs at the State Department. But how could Greg Craig, who had written the detailed memo saying Hillary Clinton “did not do any heavy-lifting” on foreign policy during Bill Clinton’s administration, work as, say, deputy secretary of state under Clinton? How could Samantha Power, who had once labeled Clinton a “monster,” take a job at the State Department in her field of human rights? Would Jeffrey Bader, who had worked as Bill Clinton’s China specialist but then campaigned for Obama, feel comfortable in a role as assistant secretary of state for East Asia? The problems extended down throughout the Obama campaign’s foreign policy team. “There are quite a number of, especially, younger folks who are moving from angst to anxiety to anger,” said one Obama supporter during the transition. “After all, most of the jobs [for political appointments in foreign policy] are at the State Department.”⁵

Apart from considerations of jobs and patronage, some critics also contended that the Clinton appointment was bad for foreign policy. They argued that Obama possessed a rare opportunity to show the rest of the world that the United States was turning a page after the Bush administration—and that Clinton could blur Obama’s message. In the campaign, she had taken a different view from Obama on the Iraq War and about the idea of negotiating with adversaries like Iran. Would she now compromise his view of the world? Worst of all, how could Obama fire her? Moreover, critics asked, what did she really know about foreign policy, anyway?

Such critics often missed the point and, indeed, the underlying purpose of Obama’s decision to appoint Clinton. It was a matter of long-term strategy, both for politics and also for Obama’s foreign policy. Obama was removing Clinton from the Senate, where she would have been an independent power

center, and putting her inside his administration, where she would find it far harder to oppose or criticize what he was doing.

Over the previous half century, three incumbent American presidents—Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush—had been voted out of office after one term. A fourth, Lyndon Johnson, decided not to run for reelection. All four of them had been challenged from within their own party. Hillary Clinton in the Senate under Obama would have been like Robert Kennedy in the Johnson years or Ted Kennedy in the Carter years—a magnet for intraparty opposition to the president.

To be sure, Hillary had been somewhat more hawkish on foreign policy issues than Obama, and thus less popular with the Democrats' liberal base. But that didn't mean much. If Clinton had stayed on in the Senate, it is not hard to imagine that, when Obama decided to send more American troops to Afghanistan, the groundswell of antiwar opposition within the Democratic Party might have still gravitated toward her, as Obama's leading opponent within the party. (A hypothetical first critical speech by Senator Hillary Clinton criticizing Obama on Afghanistan would not have needed to be dovish in its rhetoric. She might have said, simply, that his administration "lacked a plan" or "lacked a strategy" in Afghanistan, thereby winning support from the doves without necessarily joining them. After another speech or two, Hillary Clinton might have emerged as an intraparty opponent of the war, much like Bobby Kennedy.)

The Clinton appointment was a classic example of the famous old political axiom set forth by Lyndon Johnson when talking about J. Edgar Hoover that "it's probably better to have [a potential adversary] inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in." Even after recognizing this reality, Obama's early supporters were still unhappy. One line making the rounds during the transition was that Lyndon Johnson's line didn't apply: "The trouble is that the Clintons piss in all directions," one liberal Democrat said bitterly. "They're incontinent."

Over the long run, Hillary Clinton's appointment would work out much better than Obama's early supporters had feared. It would also work out well for Clinton, who would eventually come to be viewed as loyal, competent and (most important of all) a leader in her own right, operating independently from her husband. Obama's choice for secretary of state was not,

however, a step toward dramatically new foreign policy, as he had promised during his presidential campaign.

None of Obama's senior campaign advisers in foreign policy got any of the top foreign policy jobs in his administration. Nor, for that matter, did others from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. The positions of secretary of state, defense and treasury, the national security adviser and the director of the CIA were all filled elsewhere.

For secretary of defense, Obama decided to reappoint Robert Gates, the former CIA director George W. Bush had brought to the Pentagon to replace Donald Rumsfeld in late 2006. Gates brought to the Obama administration a wealth of experience and knowledge in foreign policy. Like Hillary Clinton, Gates also represented a sense of continuity with the past, even though Obama had attacked foreign policy insiders during his campaign.

Gates had once taken to the streets to join an antiwar demonstration, but the war in question was Vietnam, not Iraq. He had begun his government career in 1966 as a CIA specialist on the Soviet Union. Four years later, when President Nixon extended the Vietnam War into Cambodia, Gates, then twenty-five years old, protested. "I and virtually all of my friends and acquaintances in CIA were opposed to the war and to any prolonged strategy for extracting us," Gates later wrote. "Feelings among my colleagues—and nearly all of the men in those days were military veterans—were strong."⁶

Gates rose through the ranks at the CIA as a Soviet analyst and, consistently, a Cold War hawk. He served for a time as a Soviet adviser on Jimmy Carter's national security staff, working for Zbigniew Brzezinski. After returning to the CIA, he became a central figure in the Washington battles over Soviet policy in the late 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz believed that Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev represented a fundamental change from past Soviet leaders; Gates, by that time the deputy director at the CIA, argued that Gorbachev represented continuity with the past and presided over the same old Soviet system.

President George H. W. Bush appointed Gates as first deputy national security adviser and then as director of central intelligence. It was during this period, in the elder Bush's administration, that Gates served most easily with colleagues whose views were closest to his own. His mentor was Brent

Scowcroft, Bush's national security adviser; he also worked closely alongside Colin Powell, whom Bush had appointed as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

With Bill Clinton's election, Gates left the CIA. He went off to his lake-front home on Big Lake in western Washington, wrote a memoir and served as university president at Texas A&M until George W. Bush appointed him to replace Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense.

At his confirmation hearing at the end of 2006, Gates made no commitments to bring the American troops home from Iraq. Still, he earned praise for his willingness to admit that the United States was not winning the war. The Democrats, delighted by Rumsfeld's departure, did little to challenge Gates. One columnist mockingly summarized the mood of Congress at the time: "And so it came to pass, in the twelfth month of the sixth year of the reign of Bush, that a prophet came forth to deliver us from the war in Babylon."⁷

At the time Gates was sworn in, it appeared that the stage was being set for a gradual pullout from Iraq. Congress had set up an Iraq Study Group, made up of illustrious Americans of both political parties, to study the war and make policy recommendations. At the end of 2006, the group issued what was known as the Baker-Hamilton Report. It recommended phasing out the American military presence in Iraq, with most combat brigades out of the country by the beginning of 2008.

Instead of scaling back, however, Bush decided to escalate the war in an effort to turn it around. At the beginning of 2007, the president and his new defense secretary announced a "surge" in U.S. forces, dispatching more than 20,000 additional U.S. troops to Iraq. Bush also announced the appointment of a new military commander, General David Petraeus, the military leader most closely identified with the strategy of counterinsurgency. Within a year, American deaths in Iraq dropped to their lowest levels since the start of the war.

Thus Obama, in reappointing Gates as his own defense secretary, was keeping a knowledgeable, experienced hand on the job at the Pentagon. But he was also choosing someone who had helped to initiate and carry out for two years essentially the same approach in Iraq (more troops, counterinsurgency) that the Obama campaign and even the mainstream Democratic foreign policy elite had vigorously opposed during Bush's second term.

For two other top positions in his administration, Obama chose former military leaders. He picked James Jones, a former four-star general and commandant of the Marine Corps, as his national security adviser. Obama barely knew Jones, but he had come with high recommendations from foreign policy "wise men" such as Scowcroft. The job of director of national intelligence went to Dennis Blair, a former admiral who had been commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific. Jones and Blair reflected the distinct "anti-Rumsfeld" cast of the Obama administration. Both men had been critical of Rumsfeld's leadership of the military; during the Bush years each had been a potential candidate for promotion to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but had been passed over by Rumsfeld.

There was a political component to the selection of Jones and Blair, just as there had been in the Clinton appointment. Taken together, Jones, Blair and Gates provided Obama with some cover for his decisions on defense and military issues. For more than three decades, ever since the Vietnam era, the Democrats had been obliged to defend themselves against recurrent Republican charges that they were soft or weak on national security. Obama himself had not served in the military and had run for president essentially as the antiwar candidate; thus, he might be vulnerable to the same old attacks. With a Bush appointee in charge of the Pentagon and with former military leaders for the National Security Council and the intelligence community, Obama could insulate himself. Moreover, Gates, Jones and Blair could help explain and defend Obama's decisions to the military and intelligence communities—and, if things went seriously wrong, could share the blame.

The result of all these choices, however, was that those who'd helped Obama in his presidential campaign were virtually shut out of the top jobs in his new administration. Obama had no one comparable to Secretary of State James Baker or Brent Scowcroft, who had been George H. W. Bush's longtime friends and associates. Nor did Obama have anyone like Zbigniew Brzezinski, Tony Lake or Condoleezza Rice, who had served as the top foreign policy advisers for the presidential campaigns of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively, before going on, in each case, to serve as national security adviser in the White House.

From the Obama campaign team, only Susan Rice was given a senior position, as ambassador to the United Nations, a job two hundred miles

away. Anyone holding that job has to battle (successfully, in Rice's case) for cabinet rank and a role in the Washington decision making. John Kerry, who had endorsed Obama at the pivotal moment when Obama lost the New Hampshire primary, did not get the appointment he sought as secretary of state. The Obama campaign's leading adviser on defense policy, former secretary of the navy Richard Danzig, did not join the new administration. There had been speculation Danzig might serve as Gates's deputy secretary of defense, but Gates made clear he thought it would blur lines of authority to have a senior Democrat (and potential successor) working right down the hall from him in the Pentagon.

On the other hand, Obama brought to the National Security Council a few younger, lesser-known aides who had been handling foreign policy for him during the campaign: Mark Lippert, Denis McDonough and Ben Rhodes. All of them were given jobs on the National Security Council, along with Samantha Power, another adviser close to the president.

The effect of these personnel decisions was that Obama had only distant relationships with those who held formal responsibilities for foreign policy, such as the secretary of state and the national security adviser, but he was extremely close to the former campaign aides on the National Security Council staff. It didn't take long for the word to spread throughout the top levels of the federal government: If you get a request from Jim Jones, he might or might not be speaking for the president. If you get a request from Denis McDonough, he's asking on behalf of the president himself.

On December 1, 2008, Barack Obama held a press conference in Chicago to introduce his national security team, including not only Clinton, Gates and Jones, but his other choices as well: Attorney General Eric Holder, Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. Dressed in a dark suit with red tie, Obama towered over Clinton and Gates as the nominees read prepared statements. Gates's statement was terse, only six sentences long, as if he were in a hurry to get back to his Pentagon job. Clinton took the time to thank the voters of New York for her time in the Senate. The longest speech, predictably, came from Vice President-elect Joe Biden, who discoursed on his relationships with the members of the team.

Obama easily fielded questions about how he and his aides could work with Clinton after they had belittled her foreign policy credentials during the primaries. He accused reporters of "having fun" by dredging up anti-Clinton quotes made "in the heat of a campaign."⁸

The Obama team had already shrewdly deflected attention away from the politics of the Clinton appointment—whether, for example, Obama was appointing her to remove a potential source of intraparty opposition—by touting the idea of a "team of rivals." That phrase, taken from the title of Doris Kearns Goodwin's book on Abraham Lincoln's Civil War cabinet, gave a grand historical gloss to the uneasy merger of the Obama and Clinton teams, which everyone knew would be carefully scrutinized for any sign of discord.

Nevertheless, at the initial press conference Obama appeared considerably more comfortable with Clinton than, eight years earlier, George W. Bush had looked while announcing his appointment of Colin Powell as secretary of state (Powell proceeded to dominate the ensuing press conference). Bush's foreign policy team had been a genuine team of rivals; Obama's team was something less than that. As applied to the Obama cabinet, "team of rivals" was mostly a marketing concept for a Clinton appointment that would not go down well with the Obama faithful.

"In this uncertain world, the time has come for a new beginning, a new dawn of American leadership to overcome the challenges of the twenty-first century," Obama declared at the press conference. As so often during the campaign, Obama was promising a break with the foreign policies of his predecessors.

The prominent figures he appointed to his cabinet, however, were not new and they had strong ties to the policies of earlier presidents. Whether viewed together or separately, the appointments gave no clue as to what Obama thought a "new beginning" should be. They were talented people. But they were not a team, they were not close to Obama and, indeed, they did not necessarily know his goals or vision for where America was headed. Obama had campaigned against the foreign policy elite. As president, however, he would rely on old Washington hands to help run the government. What Obama called the "new dawn of American leadership" began to look surprisingly similar to yesterday's dawn.

Obama was not putting his administration together in a vacuum. The president-elect was reflecting the influences and carrying the burdens of history. Over the previous four decades, the United States had been struggling to figure out its relationship with the rest of the world. And in domestic politics, the Democratic Party had been trying to iron out some sort of consensus on fundamental questions concerning American power and the use of force.

By appointing Clinton, Obama was seeking to reunify the Democrats. Yet the party's internal disagreements over foreign policy did not start with the two leaders' battle in the Democratic primaries of 2008. In dealing with the world, the Democrats had a long, tangled history of lessons learned and unlearned, of contradictions resolved or papered over, of issues pressed forward or discarded. Obama's foreign policy did not start from scratch. It was freighted with the legacy of the past and could best be understood against the context of the party's struggles over the previous four decades.

1

"A Look I Recognized"

In the fall of 2009, John Kerry, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, visited Afghanistan, where American troops were enmeshed in a nettlesome war that President Barack Obama was in the process of expanding. Kerry not only met with Afghan president Hamid Karzai, but took the time to travel around the countryside. Upon coming back to Washington, he reflected on what he had witnessed. As he stared out from inside an armored personnel carrier in Afghanistan, Kerry said, he saw on the faces of ordinary people "a look I recognized from forty years ago." Afghanistan and its people reminded Kerry of Vietnam. He repeated a line from the congressional testimony he gave in 1971, as a leader of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" he had asked. Upon returning home from Afghanistan, Kerry remarked, "Thirty-eight years later, I keep that question very much in mind."¹

For the Democratic Party, the war in Vietnam was not only tragic, but politically devastating. Between 1968 and 1988, the Democrats lost five out of six presidential elections. The only Democratic president of that era, Jimmy Carter, lasted only four years. The divisions caused by the war had caused core groups of Democrats to desert the party for the Republicans. It was not until Bill Clinton's election in 1992 that the party began to regain its footing.

And still the legacy of Vietnam lingered. When President Obama decided to send more troops to Afghanistan at the end of his first year in the White House, Obama and the younger members of his administration dismissed the comparison to the Vietnam War as irrelevant. "There are those