Barack Obama came to Washington just six years ago, having spent his professional life as a part-time lawyer, part-time law professor, and part-time state legislator in Illinois. As an undergraduate, he took courses in history and international relations, but neither his academic life nor his work in Springfield gave him an especially profound grasp of foreign affairs. As he coasted toward winning a seat in the U.S. Senate, in 2004, he began to reach out to a broad range of foreign-policy experts—politicians, diplomats, academics, and journalists.

As a student during the Reagan years, Obama gravitated toward conventionally left-leaning positions. At Occidental, he demonstrated in favor of divesting from apartheid South Africa. At Columbia, he wrote a unforgettable essay in *Sundial*, a campus publication, in favor of the nuclear-freeze movement. As a professor at the University of Chicago, he focussed on civil-rights law and race. And, as a candidate who emphasized his “story,” Obama argued that what he lacked in experience with foreign affairs he made up for with foreign travel: four years in Indonesia as a boy, and trips to Pakistan, India, Kenya, and Europe during and after college. But there was no mistaking the lightness of his résumé. Just a year before coming to Washington, State Senator Obama was not immersed in the dangers of nuclear Pakistan or an ascendant China; as a provincial legislator, he was investigating the dangers of a toy known as the Yo-Yo Water Ball. (He tried, unsuccessfully, to have it banned.)

Obama had always read widely, and now he was determined to get a deeper education. He read popular books on foreign affairs by Fareed Zakaria and Thomas Friedman. He met with Anthony Lake, who had left the Nixon Administration over Vietnam and went on to work in
Democratic Administrations, and with Susan Rice, who had served in the Clinton Administration and carried with her the guilt of having failed to act to prevent the Rwandan genocide. He also contacted Samantha Power, a thirty-four-year-old journalist and Harvard professor specializing in human rights. In her twenties, Power had reported from the Balkans and witnessed the campaigns of ethnic cleansing there. In 2002, after graduating from Harvard Law School, she wrote “A Problem from Hell,” which surveyed the grim history of six genocides committed in the twentieth century. Propounding a liberal-interventionist view, Power argued that “mass killing” on the scale of Rwanda or Bosnia must be prevented by other nations, including the United States. She wrote that America and its allies rarely have perfect information about when a regime is about to commit genocide; a President, therefore, must have “a bias toward belief” that massacres are imminent. Stopping the execution of thousands of foreigners, she wrote, was, in some cases, worth the cost in dollars, troops, and strained alliances. The book, which was extremely influential, especially on the left, won a Pulitzer Prize, in 2003. Critics considered her views radical and dangerously impractical.

After reading “A Problem from Hell,” Obama invited Power to dinner. He said he wanted to talk about foreign policy. The meal lasted four hours. As a fledgling member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and an ambitious politician with his sights set on higher office, Obama agreed to have Power spend a year in his office as a foreign-policy fellow.

In his first news conference after winning election to the Senate, the press asked whether he intended to run for President, but he assured reporters, as well as his aides, that he would not even consider it until 2012 or 2016. He knew that he could not have a serious impact on issues like Iraq or the Sudan as a junior committee member, but he was determined to learn the institution and to acquire, as Hillary Clinton had, a reputation not for celebrity but for substance. In foreign affairs, as in so much else, he was determined to break free of the old ideologies and categories. But he would take it step by step.

Obama entered the Senate in 2005, at a moment of passionate foreign-policy debate within the Democratic Party. The invasion of Iraq was seen as interventionism executed under false pretenses and with catastrophic consequences. Many on the left argued that liberal interventionists, particularly in Congress and in the press, had given crucial cover to the Bush Administration during the run-up to the war. Hillary Clinton, who often sided with the humanitarian hawks in her husband’s White House, and who went on to vote for the Iraq war, in 2002, seemed to some to be the embodiment of all that had gone wrong.

One reaction among liberals to the Bush years and to Iraq was to retreat from “idealism” toward “realism,” in which the United States would act cautiously and, above all, according to national interests rather than moral imperatives. The debate is rooted in the country’s early history. America, John Quincy Adams argued, “does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to freedom and independence of all,” but the “champion and
vindicator only of her own.”

In 1966, Adams’s words were repeated by George Kennan, perhaps the most articulate realist of the twentieth century, in opposing the Vietnam War. To Kennan and his intellectual followers, foreign-policy problems are always more complicated than Americans, in their native idealism, usually allow. The use of force to stop human-rights abuses or to promote democracy, they argue, usually ends poorly. In the fall of 2002, six months before the invasion of Iraq, Kennan said, “Today, if we went into Iraq, as the President would like us to do, you know where you begin. You never know where you are going to end.”

As Obama sorted through the arguments, other foreign-policy liberals were determined to prevent Iraq from besmirching the whole program of liberal internationalism. Humanitarian intervention—which Power helped advance, though she vigorously opposed the Iraq War—should not be abandoned because of the failures in Baghdad. Nor should American diplomacy turn away from emphasizing the virtues of bringing the world democracy. Anne-Marie Slaughter, a professor of international affairs at Princeton and a Democrat, wrote in the liberal journal Democracy that an overreaction to the Bush years might mean that “realists could again rule the day, embracing order and stability over ideology and values.”

After little more than a year in the Senate, Obama was bored, and began to take seriously the frequent calls to run for President. To be a candidate, he needed to distinguish himself from his foremost potential opponent, Hillary Clinton, as well as from President Bush. One of the clearest paths to distinction, especially in the primaries, was to emphasize his early opposition, as a state senator, to the Iraq war. He started to move away from the ideas of people like Power and Slaughter. He pointedly noted that George H. W. Bush’s management of the end of the Cold War was masterly. The President had sometimes kept quiet about the aspirations of pro-democracy activists in Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere, in order to maintain the confidence of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin. It was just the sort of political performance to which Obama aspired.

In making the case against Hillary Clinton, Obama slyly argued that the George W. Bush years were in some ways a continuation of the Bill Clinton years, and that the United States needed to return to the philosophy of an earlier era. The proselytizing about democracy and the haste to bomb other countries in the name of humanitarian aid had “stretched our military to the breaking point and distracted us from the growing threats of a dangerous world,” Obama said in a speech in 2006, a few weeks before he announced his Presidential candidacy. He spoke of “a strategy no longer driven by ideology and politics but one that is based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground and our interests in the region. This kind of realism has been missing since the very conception of this war, and it is what led me to publicly oppose it in 2002.”

In 2007, Obama called Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national-security adviser and the reigning realist of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment. Obama told him that he had read his recent book, “Second Chance,” in which Brzezinski criticized Presidents Clinton and
George W. Bush and their handling of the post-Cold War world. They began to speak and exchange e-mails about policy, and Brzezinski travelled with Obama during a stretch of the campaign. In September, 2007, Brzezinski introduced Obama at an event in Clinton, Iowa, where the candidate discussed the failures in Iraq. "I thought he had a really incisive grasp of what the twenty-first century is all about and how America has to relate to it," Brzezinski told me. "He was reacting in a way that I very much shared, and we had a meeting of the minds—namely, that George Bush put the United States on a suicidal course."

As he campaigned in New Hampshire, in 2007, Obama said that he would not leave troops in Iraq even to stop genocide. "Well, look, if that's the criteria by which we are making decisions on the deployment of U.S. forces, then by that argument you would have three hundred thousand troops in the Congo right now, where millions have been slaughtered as a consequence of ethnic strife, which we haven't done," he said. "We would be deploying unilaterally and occupying the Sudan, which we haven't done."

At a campaign event in Pennsylvania, Obama said, "The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush's father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan."

In the end, Barack Obama overcame Hillary Clinton's campaign warnings that he was too callow, too naïve about dealing with rogue regimes, too untested to respond to the "3 A.M." emergencies from all corners of the globe. Obama entered the White House at a moment of radical transition in global politics, and one of his most significant appointments was Clinton as his Secretary of State. Although he had made plain in the campaign that he disagreed with some of her foreign-policy views, he admired her discipline and believed that, as a member of the Cabinet, she wouldn't publicly break with the President. And he would need her. Obama faced economic catastrophe at home and American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; serious regional threats from Pakistan and Iran; global terrorism; the ascendance of China and India; and a situation that was almost impossible to discuss—a vivid sense of American decline.

American values and interests are woven together, and no President is always either an idealist or a realist. Officials who identify with the same label often disagree with one another. Humanitarian interventionists were divided over the Iraq war; Cold War realists had split over détente with the Soviet Union. The categories describe only broad ideological directions and tendencies. But, as Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, observed, "the battle between realists and idealists is the fundamental fault line of the American foreign-policy debate."

After the Inauguration, the realists began to win that debate within the Administration. The two most influential foreign-policy advisers in the White House are Thomas Donilon, the national-security adviser, and Denis McDonough, a deputy national-security adviser. Donilon, who is fifty-five, is a longtime Washington lawyer, lobbyist, and Democratic Party strategist.
McDonough started out as a congressional staffer and campaign adviser to Obama, a role that has given him a reputation as a non-ideological political fixer.

The National Security Council is a bureaucracy that helps the President streamline decision-making, and Donilon seems to have thought extensively about how that system works. Like the President, he values staff discretion. His rule for hiring at the N.S.C. is to find people who are, in his words, “high value, low maintenance.” Obama’s N.S.C. adopted the model of the first Bush Administration. “It’s essentially based on the process that was put in place by General Brent Scowcroft and Bob Gates in the late nineteen-eighties,” Donilon told me, speaking of Bush’s national-security adviser and his deputy, the current Secretary of Defense. The most important feature, Donilon said, is that the N.S.C., based at the White House, controls “the sole process through which policy would be developed.”

One of Donilon’s overriding beliefs, which Obama adopted as his own, was that America needed to rebuild its reputation, extricate itself from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and turn its attention toward Asia and China’s unchecked influence in the region. America was “overweighted” in the former and “underweighted” in the latter, Donilon told me. “We’ve been on a little bit of a Middle East detour over the course of the last ten years,” Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said. “And our future will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia and the Pacific region.”

In December, 2009, Obama announced that he would draw down U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan by the end of his first term. He also promised, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly last year, that he was “moving toward a more targeted approach” that “dismantles terrorist networks without deploying large American armies.”

“The project of the first two years has been to effectively deal with the legacy issues that we inherited, particularly the Iraq war, the Afghan war, and the war against Al Qaeda, while rebalancing our resources and our posture in the world,” Benjamin Rhodes, one of Obama’s deputy national-security advisers, said. “If you were to boil it all down to a bumper sticker, it’s ‘Wind down these two wars, reestablish American standing and leadership in the world, and focus on a broader set of priorities, from Asia and the global economy to a nuclear-nonproliferation regime.’ ”

Obama’s lengthy bumper-sticker credo did not include a call to promote democracy or protect human rights. Obama aides who focussed on these issues were awarded lesser White House positions. Samantha Power became senior director of multilateral affairs at the N.S.C. Michael McFaul, a Stanford professor who believes that the U.S. should make democracy promotion the heart of its foreign policy, landed a mid-level position at the White House.

Most of the foreign-policy issues that Obama emphasized in his first two years involved stepping away from idealism. In the hope of persuading Iran’s regime to abandon its nuclear ambitions, Obama pointedly rejected Bush’s “axis of evil” terminology. In a video message to
Iranians on March 20, 2009, he respectfully addressed “the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” In order to engage China on economic issues, Obama didn’t press very hard on human rights. And, because any effort to push the Israelis and Palestinians toward a final settlement would benefit from help from Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, Obama was not especially outspoken about the sins of Middle Eastern autocrats and kings.

Despite the realist tilt, Obama has argued from the start that he was anti-ideological, that he defied traditional categories and ideologies. In Oslo, in December of 2009, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama said, “Within America, there has long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists—a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world.” The speech echoed Obama’s 2002 address to an antiwar demonstration in Chicago’s Federal Plaza. In Chicago, he had confounded his leftist audience by emphasizing the need to fight some wars, but not “dumb” ones, like the one in Iraq. In Oslo, he surprised a largely left-leaning audience by talking about the martial imperatives of a Commander-in-Chief overseeing two wars. Obama’s aides often insist that he is an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works. He is, one says, a “consequentialist.”

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton turned her department into something of a haven for the ideas that flourished late in the Clinton Administration. She picked Anne-Marie Slaughter as her director of policy planning—a job first held by George Kennan, in the Truman Administration. She also brought in Harold Koh, the State Department’s legal adviser and a scholar on issues concerning human rights and democracy. Walking around the mazelike building in Foggy Bottom, you get the sense that if you duck into any office you will find earnest young women and men discussing globalization, the possibility that Facebook can topple tyrannies, and what is called “soft power,” the ability to bend the world toward your view through attraction, not coercion.

Not long ago, I met with Kris Balderston, the State Department’s representative for global partnerships. He started working with Clinton ten years ago, when he guided her through the politics of upstate New York during her Senate race. Now he works on an array of entrepreneurial projects that complement traditional diplomacy. He talked excitedly about working with Vietnamese-Americans to build stronger ties to Vietnam and about distributing vaccines in partnership with Coca-Cola. He pointed to a bookcase stocked with devices that looked like a cross between a lantern and a paint bucket. These were advanced cookstoves. “This is a problem that the Secretary saw when she was First Lady,” Balderston said, explaining how lethal cooking smoke can be. “One half of the world cooks in open fires. Two million people die a year from it—that’s more than malaria and tuberculosis combined, and nearly as much as H.I.V.” On a trip to Congo in 2009, Clinton met a woman in a refugee camp who had been raped in the jungle on the outskirts of the camp while gathering wood for her stove. Telling the story at
the State Department, Clinton was angrier than Balderston had ever seen her. “We have got to do something about this,” she said. Balderston spends much of his time trying to build a market for inexpensive, clean-burning cookstoves in the developing world.

But Clinton’s involvement in soft-power initiatives was matched by the kind of hardheadedness about foreign policy she had displayed during her Presidential campaign. She has repeatedly aligned herself with the most consistent realist in the Obama Administration: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who was deputy national-security adviser in the first Bush Administration and Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush. Clinton’s advisers told me that, during her first two years in Foggy Bottom, Clinton agreed with Gates on every major issue.

“Secretary Clinton can push the agenda she pushes because she is tough and people know she is tough,” Slaughter said. “It’s very interesting—you’ve had three women Secretaries of State, and she’s the first one who can stand up and say publicly, ‘We are going to empower women and girls around the world. We are going to make development a priority of foreign policy. We are going to engage people as well as governments.’

“Madeleine Albright believed in the importance of those issues, but she could never have made it the core of her public agenda. She was the first woman Secretary of State, which meant that she had to out-tough the tough guys. She did that on the Balkans. Condi Rice helped double foreign aid, but she was first and foremost a Cold Warrior, and she could throw around ‘I.C.B.M.’s and ‘S.L.B.M.’s and ‘MIRV’s with the best of them. That was the only way she could make it, not only as a woman in the nineteen-eighties but as an African-American woman. You had to be way tougher and way more knowledgeable about weapons than any man.” A former Administration official said, “Hillary has to guard her flank. And one of the ways she guards her flank is she rarely deviates from Gates. If she and Gates both weigh in, they are much more likely to get their way.”

Obama’s first test at managing the clashing ideologies within his Administration came during the review of Afghanistan policy in 2009. During the campaign, Obama said that he would add troops in Afghanistan, a war, he argued, that Bush had neglected. But Obama’s campaign promise bumped hard against the judgment of several new advisers, including Richard Holbrooke, who tried to convince the President that sending forty thousand more troops to Afghanistan, as the military urged, was counterproductive. It would prevent Obama from rebalancing American foreign policy toward the Pacific, and it would have little impact on Al Qaeda, which is based largely in Pakistan. Obama had appointed Holbrooke his Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Holbrooke, a brash and influential diplomat, found himself in the unusual circumstance of being ignored. He wanted to send far fewer troops and reenergize regional diplomacy, including reconciliation talks with the Taliban. He believed that the lesson of Vietnam was that the diplomats, rather than the generals, needed to be in charge, but he could rarely penetrate the insular world of Obama’s White House to make that case to the President.
Holbrooke had been a devoted supporter of Hillary Clinton during the Presidential campaign, and she protected him from Obama aides who viewed with suspicion his sizable ego and stream of positive press clippings. When a top official at the White House tried to push Holbrooke out, in early 2010, Clinton intervened on his behalf. But Holbrooke still could not get a one-on-one meeting with the President. And at the crucial national-security meetings on Afghanistan Clinton did not adopt Holbrooke’s views. She sided with Gates and the generals in calling for the maximum number of soldiers to surge into Afghanistan. Obama agreed to send thirty thousand more troops, although he insisted that they would start coming home in July, 2011. Holbrooke’s widow, the writer Kati Marton, who has been reviewing her husband’s memos and archives, told me that they “tell a dramatic story of a fractured relationship between the State Department and White House.”

On December 11, 2010, while meeting with Clinton at the State Department, Holbrooke suffered a split aorta, and he died forty-eight hours later. Bill Clinton spoke at Holbrooke’s memorial service, held on January 14th at the Kennedy Center. “I loved the guy—because he could do,” Clinton said. “Doing in diplomacy saves lives.” He went on, “And I never did understand how people would let a little rough edges, which to me was so obvious what he was doing, it was so obvious why he felt the way he did—I could never understand people who didn’t appreciate him.” Several people told Marton they thought that Bill Clinton was sending a message to Obama.

In the end, Obama made a decision about Afghanistan that was at odds with his own goal of rebalancing toward Asia and the Pacific. “The U.S. has been on a greater Middle East detour largely of its own choosing through a war of choice in Iraq and what became a war of choice in 2009 in Afghanistan,” Haass said. “Afghanistan is entirely inconsistent with the focus of time and resources on Asia. If your goal is to reorient or refocus or rebalance U.S. policy, the Administration’s commitment to so doing is at the moment more rhetorical than actual.”

Obama came into office emphasizing bureaucratic efficiency, which he believed would lead to wise rulings. But the Afghanistan decision, like all government work, was driven by politics and ideology. Obama’s eagerness to keep his campaign promise, the military’s view that reducing troops meant a loss of face, Clinton’s decision to align with Gates, and Holbrooke’s inability to influence the White House staff all ultimately conspired to push Obama toward the surge.

Obama’s other key campaign promise—to engage with the leaders of countries hostile to the U.S.—sometimes meant de-emphasizing democracy and human rights, which had been tainted by Bush’s “freedom agenda” in the Middle East. Tyrannical regimes are less likely to make deals with you if you talk persistently about overthrowing them. Obama’s speech in Cairo, delivered on June 4, 2009, and devoted to improving America’s relationship with the Muslim world, was organized as a list of regional priorities. He discussed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Arab-Israeli peace, and Iran’s nuclear ambitions. He then gave a hesitant
endorsement of America’s commitment to democracy in the region. He began, “I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other.”

A week later, however, a disputed Presidential election in Iran triggered large demonstrations there, which were soon labelled the Green Revolution. For the first five months after his Inauguration, Obama had tried to engage with the regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in an effort to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Now he faced the choice between keeping his distance and coming to the aid of the nascent pro-democracy movement, which was rallying behind Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who had finished second behind Ahmadinejad. Obama chose to keep his distance, providing only mild rhetorical support. In an interview with CNBC after the protests began, he said that “the difference between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as has been advertised.”

During the peak of the protests in Iran, Jared Cohen, a young staffer at the State Department who worked for Slaughter, contacted officials at Twitter and asked the company not to perform a planned upgrade that would have shut down the service temporarily in Iran, where protesters were using it to get information to the international media. The move violated Obama’s rule of non-interference.

White House officials “were so mad that somebody had actually ‘interfered’ in Iranian politics, because they were doing their damnedest to not interfere,” the former Administration official said. “Now, to be fair to them, it was also the understanding that if we interfered it could look like the Green movement was Western-backed, but that really wasn’t the core of it. The core of it was we were still trying to engage the Iranian government and we did not want to do anything that made us side with the protesters. To the Secretary’s credit, she realized, I think, before other people, that this is ridiculous, that we had to change our line.” The official said that Cohen “almost lost his job over it. If it had been up to the White House, they would have fired him.”

Clinton did not betray any disagreement with the President over Iran policy, but in an interview with me she cited Cohen’s action with pride. “When it came to the elections, we had a lot of messages from people inside Iran and their supporters outside of Iran saying, ‘For heaven’s sakes, don’t claim this as part of the democracy agenda. This is indigenous to us. We are struggling against this tyrannical regime. If you are too outspoken in our support, we will lose legitimacy!’ Now, that’s a tough balancing act. It’s easy to stand up if you don’t worry about the consequences. Now, we were very clear in saying, ‘We are supporting those who are protesting peacefully,’ and we put our social-media gurus at work in trying to keep connections going, so that we helped to provide that base for communicating that was necessary for the demonstrations.”
One suggestion that came up in interviews with Obama's current and former foreign-policy advisers was that the Administration's policy debates sometimes broke down along gender lines. The realists who view foreign policy as a great chess game—and who want to focus on China and India—are usually men. The idealists, who talk about democracy and human rights, are often women. (White House officials told me that this critique is outlandish.)

Slaughter, who admired Clinton but felt alienated by people at the White House, resigned in February, and in her farewell speech at the State Department she described a gender divide at the heart of Obama's foreign-policy team. She argued that in the twenty-first century America needed to focus on societies as well as on states. "Unfortunately, the people who focus on those two worlds here in Washington are still often very different groups. The world of states is still the world of high politics, hard power, realpolitik, and, largely, men," she said. "The world of societies is still too often the world of low politics, soft power, human rights, democracy, and development, and, largely, women. One of the best parts of my two years here has been the opportunity to work with so many amazing and talented women—truly extraordinary people. But Washington still has a ways to go before their voices are fully heard and respected."

On August 12, 2010, Obama sent a five-page memorandum called "Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa" to Vice-President Joseph Biden, Clinton, Gates, Donilon, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the other senior members of his foreign-policy team. Though the Iranian regime had effectively crushed the Green Revolution, the country was still experiencing sporadic protests. Egypt would face crucial parliamentary elections in November. The memo began with a stark conclusion about trends in the region.

"Progress toward political reform and openness in the Middle East and North Africa lags behind other regions and has, in some cases, stalled," the President wrote. He noted that even the more liberal countries were cracking down on public gatherings, the press, and political opposition groups. But something was stirring. There was "evidence of growing citizen discontent with the region's regimes," he wrote. It was likely that "if present trends continue," allies there would "opt for repression rather than reform to manage domestic dissent."

Obama's analysis showed a desire to balance interests and ideals. The goals of reform and democracy were couched in the language of U.S. interests rather than the sharp moral language that statesmen often use in public. "Increased repression could threaten the political and economic stability of some of our allies, leave us with fewer capable, credible partners who can support our regional priorities, and further alienate citizens in the region," Obama wrote.

"Moreover, our regional and international credibility will be undermined if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens."

Obama instructed his staff to come up with "tailored," "country by country" strategies on political reform. He told his advisers to challenge the traditional idea that stability in the Middle East always served U.S. interests. Obama wanted to weigh the risks of both "continued support
for increasingly unpopular and repressive regimes” and a “strong push by the United States for reform.”

He also wrote that “the advent of political succession in a number of countries offers a potential opening for political reform in the region.” If the United States managed the coming transitions “poorly,” it “could have negative implications for U.S. interests, including for our standing among Arab publics.”

The review was led by three N.S.C. staffers: Samantha Power, Gayle Smith, who works on development issues, and Dennis Ross, a Middle East expert with a broad portfolio in the White House. Soon, they and officials from other agencies were sitting in the White House, debating the costs and benefits of supporting autocrats. A White House official involved said the group studied “the taboos, all the questions you’re not supposed to ask.” For example, they tested the assumption that the President could not publicly criticize President Hosni Mubarak because it would jeopardize Egypt’s cooperation on issues related to Israel or its assistance in tracking terrorists. Not true, they concluded: the Egyptians pursued peace with Israel and crushed terrorists because it was in their interest to do so, not because the U.S. asked them to.

They tested the idea that countries with impoverished populations needed to develop economically before they were prepared for open political systems—a common argument that democracy promoters often run up against. Again, they concluded that the conventional wisdom was wrong. “All roads led to political reform,” the White House official said.

The group was just finishing its work, on December 17th, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a vegetable vender in Tunisia, set himself on fire outside a municipal building to protest the corruption of the country’s political system—an act that inspired protests in Tunisia and, eventually, the entire region. Democracy in the Middle East, one of the most fraught issues of the Bush years, was suddenly the signature conflict of Obama’s foreign policy.

On January 25th, the first, crucial day of the protests in Egypt, and eleven days after the removal of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, in Tunisia, Secretary Clinton declared her support for free assembly, but added, “Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people.” That evening, Obama delivered his State of the Union address, in which he praised the demonstrators in Tunisia, “where the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator,” and expressed support for the “democratic aspirations of all people.” But he did not mention Egypt. Shady el-Ghazaly Harb, one of the leaders of the coalition that started the Egyptian revolution, told me that the message the protesters got from the Obama Administration on the first day of the revolution was “Go home. We need this regime.”

A number of familiar ex-diplomats and politicians, led by Dick Cheney, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, criticized the treatment of Mubarak, and Israel and Saudi Arabia called on the Administration to stick with him. But, as the protests strengthened, it became clear that
Mubarak was doomed. According to a senior Administration official, “The question in our mind was ‘How do you manage that?’”

Obama’s instinct was to try to have it both ways. He wanted to position the United States on the side of the protesters: it’s always a good idea, politically, to support brave young men and women risking their lives for freedom, especially when their opponent is an eighty-two-year-old dictator with Swiss bank accounts. Some of Obama’s White House aides regretted having stood idly by while the Iranian regime brutally suppressed the Green Revolution; Egypt offered a second chance. Nonetheless, Obama wanted to assure other autocratic allies that the U.S. did not hastily abandon its friends, and he feared that the uprising could spin out of control. “Look at all the revolutions in history, especially the ones that are driven from the ground up, and they tend to be very chaotic and hard to find an equilibrium,” one senior official said. The French Revolution, for instance, he said, “ended up in chaos, and they ended up with Bonaparte.” Obama’s ultimate position, it seemed, was to talk like an idealist while acting like a realist.

This wasn’t an easy balance to maintain, and the first major problem arose when State Department officials learned that if Mubarak stepped down immediately, the Egyptian constitution would require a Presidential election in sixty days, long before any of the moderate parties could get organized. Egyptian officials warned the Administration that it could lead to the Muslim Brotherhood’s taking over power. “My daughter gets to go out at night,” Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Egypt’s then foreign minister, told Secretary Clinton during one conversation. “And, God damn it, I’m not going to turn this country over to people who will turn back the clock on her rights.”

Obama decided not to call for Mubarak to step down. Instead, the U.S. would encourage a transition led by Mubarak’s newly installed Vice-President, Omar Suleiman. The strategy was to avoid the constitutional process that the State Department feared would lead to chaos. The senior official told me in the midst of the crisis, “I don’t think that because a group of young people get on the street that we are obliged to be for them.”

On January 29th, the White House made two major decisions: the U.S. would announce that it supported a transition in Egypt, and Obama would send an emissary to Mubarak to explain that, in the judgment of the United States, he could not survive the protests. The emissary would tell Mubarak that his best option was to try to leave a positive legacy by steering the country toward a real democratic transformation. Frank G. Wisner, the former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt, who has long known Mubarak well, would deliver the message. The next day, Clinton appeared on five Sunday-morning talk shows to announce that Obama supported an “orderly transition” in Egypt. That afternoon, Wisner boarded a U.S. government plane for Cairo.

On January 31st, Wisner met with Mubarak in Cairo. The next day, word leaked out that Mubarak would address the country. That afternoon, Obama’s national-security advisers met in the Situation Room to discuss two issues: whether Obama should call Mubarak and whether
Obama should make a public statement. Obama joined the meeting unexpectedly. As the discussion continued, Mubarak’s speech appeared on television, and the President and his aides paused to watch. “I am now careful to conclude my work for Egypt by presenting Egypt to the next government in a constitutional way which will protect Egypt,” Mubarak said. “I want to say, in clear terms, that in the next few months that are remaining of my current reign I will work very hard to carry out all the necessary measures to transfer power.”

In Tahrir Square, the protesters erupted in rage at the meandering and confusing speech. Obama now seemed to be uncomfortable taking an attitude of cool detachment from the people in the street. He called Mubarak, and tried to find a graceful way for the Egyptian President to exit that would also take care of the constitutional concerns Egyptian officials kept raising. He asked Mubarak if there was a way to alter the constitution to allow for a stable transition. He asked if there was a way to set up a caretaker government. A White House official summarized Mubarak’s response as: “Muslim Brotherhood, Muslim Brotherhood, Muslim Brotherhood.”

Obama then made a public statement that was more confrontational: “An orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.” The urgent message alienated Israel and Saudi Arabia, among other allies. It also startled some people in the State Department. Clinton “walked a very narrow line and managed to do it without making the Egyptians too angry on either side,” a senior State Department official said. “After the President gave his statement, the people surrounding Mubarak began to get quite angry.”

The inherent contradictions of an Administration trying to simultaneously encourage and contain the forces of revolution in Egypt broke into the open on February 5th, when Wisner, who was then in New York, participated via videoconference in an international-affairs conference in Munich. After outlining the constitutional argument for keeping Mubarak in power, he said, “I therefore believe that President Mubarak’s continued leadership is critical; it’s his opportunity to write his own legacy. He’s given sixty years of his life to the service of his country.” According to friends, Wisner, who had talked with Obama before he went to Cairo, believed that his statement was consistent with the policy he was told to follow.

Clinton was at the conference in Munich, and, shortly after Wisner made his remarks, a senior Administration official gathered the press corps travelling with her in a small dining room at the Charles Hotel to brief us on the Secretary’s meetings. The official hadn’t heard Wisner’s comments, but when a reporter read a long excerpt off his BlackBerry the official blanched, his mouth agape.

“Wisner,” the official said, “was not speaking for the U.S. government or the Obama Administration. He was speaking as a private citizen.”

The public and private components of the Administration’s Egypt policy were at odds, and Wisner had risked blowing everything up. His tenure as an envoy was over. “They threw me under the bus,” a close friend remembers him saying.
Wisner referred dismissively to the “re-election committee” at the White House, according to the friend. But in this case Obama’s political interests—needing to be seen as on the side of the protesters—aligned with the policy views of the idealists. An Obama adviser declared, “Obama didn’t give the Tahrir Square crowds every last thing they sought from him at the precise moment they sought it. But he went well beyond what many of America’s allies in the region wished to see.”

In March, I travelled to Cairo with Secretary Clinton. One evening, she was scheduled to meet with Egyptians who had been prominent in the protests that brought down Mubarak. However, one group, called the Coalition of Youth Revolution, which includes leaders from the activist movements and opposition parties in Egypt, boycotted the meeting. As Clinton talked with other civil-society members upstairs at the Four Seasons Hotel, four members of the abstaining coalition agreed to talk with me and three other journalists in the lobby.

I asked why they weren’t upstairs with the Secretary of State. “Hillary was against the revolution from the beginning to the last day, O.K.?” Mohammed Abbas, of the Muslim Brotherhood, said. “Obama supported this revolution. She was against.”

Abbas and Shady el-Ghazaly Harb, a member of the liberal Democratic Front Party, said that if Obama was upstairs they would meet with him. Abbas lit up at the idea. “We respect Obama’s attitude toward our revolution, and when we were in Tahrir Square we were following all of the leaders all over the world and what were their views,” Abbas said.

“His speeches were more understanding and more appreciative of what we were doing, especially his second one,” el-Ghazaly Harb said, referring to Obama’s demand that the transition “begin now.” He added, “We were in Tahrir Square and people were cheering for Obama’s speech, because they felt he was saying that we”—America—“were inspired by the Egyptian people and we understand what the teen-agers were saying. Maybe he’s using us, but that’s what I see.”

Later, when I relayed these comments to Clinton, she told me she didn’t take the snub personally. She said, “Many years ago, I was active against the Vietnam War, and I was involved in all kinds of student politics, and so I understand there’s always a full range of people in movements like this. And I remember refusing to meet with people.” She was unmoved by the fact that these protesters had been integral to starting the revolution. “The people who start revolutions may or may not be the people who actually end up governing countries.”

The activists she did meet with were not as organized as she had hoped. “As incredibly emotional and moving and inspiring as it was,” she said, speaking of the demonstrations, “I looked at these twenty young people around the table, and they were complaining about how the elections are going to be held, and the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists are so well organized, and the remnants of the old National Democratic Party are so well organized. I said, ‘So, well, are you organizing? Do you have an umbrella group that is going to represent the youth
of Egypt? Do you have a political agenda?” And they all looked up and said no. It made my heart sink.”

On March 16th, Clinton flew from Cairo to Tunis to continue her tour of revolutionary North Africa. The route took us over the Mediterranean just off the coast of Libya. The G.P.S. maps in the cabin of Clinton’s Air Force plane lit up with the name “Benghazi,” reminding everyone that, on the ground, Muammar Qaddafi’s men were marching on that city. Earlier in the day, Qaddafi had gone on the radio to warn the citizens of Benghazi. “It’s over. We are coming tonight,” he said. “We will find you in your closets.”

Protesters had started to gather in Benghazi on February 15th. Qaddafi’s security forces reacted with violence four days later, firing on a crowd of some twenty thousand demonstrators in Benghazi and killing at least a hundred of them. On February 26th, the United Nations passed a resolution that placed an arms embargo and economic sanctions on the Libyan regime and referred Qaddafi to the International Criminal Court. Two days later, the U.S., through lobbying led by Clinton and Power, helped remove Libya from its seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council. By tightening an economic noose around Qaddafi and isolating him diplomatically, Obama and the international community were beginning to use the tools that Power had outlined in “A Problem from Hell.”

The debate then narrowed to whether the United States and others should intervene militarily. The principal option was to set up a no-fly zone to prevent Libyan planes from attacking the protest movement, which had quickly turned into a full-scale rebellion based in the eastern half of the country. The decision about intervention in Libya was an unusually clear choice between interests and values. “Of all the countries in the region there, our real interests in Libya are minimal,” Brent Scowcroft told me. For a President whose long-term goal was to extricate the U.S. from Middle East conflicts, it was an especially vexing debate.

Within the Administration, Robert Gates, the Defense Secretary, was the most strenuous opponent of establishing a no-fly zone, or any other form of military intervention. Like Scowcroft, Gates objected to intervention because he did not think it was in the United States’ vital interest. He also pointed out a fact that many people didn’t seem to understand: the first step in creating a no-fly zone would be to bomb the Libyan air defenses. Clinton disagreed with him and argued the case for intervention with Obama. It was the first major issue on which she and Gates had different views.

The days leading up to Obama’s decision were perplexing to outsiders. American Presidents usually lead the response to world crises, but Obama seemed to stay hidden that week. From the outside, it looked as though the French were dragging him into the conflict. On March 14th, Clinton arrived in Paris, but she had no firm decision to convey. According to a French official, when Clinton met with President Nicolas Sarkozy she declined to endorse the no-fly zone, which Sarkozy interpreted as American reluctance to do anything. “We started to wonder where,
exactly, the Administration was going,” the official said.

Late that evening, at her suite at the Westin hotel in Paris, Clinton met for forty-five minutes with Mahmoud Jebril, a representative from the Libyan opposition. I waited in the lobby with a number of reporters, hoping to talk to Jebril after the meeting. But all we got was Bernard-Henri Lévy, the French philosopher, who had taken up the cause of the Libyan opposition and was shepherding Jebril to his meetings with diplomats. We later learned that Jebril was dejected by Clinton’s unwillingness to commit to the no-fly zone and, not wanting to face the press, left the hotel by another exit.

The next evening, Obama held a meeting in the Situation Room. By then, it had become clear that the rebels, who had once seemed on the verge of sweeping Qaddafi out of power, were weak, and poorly armed; they had lost almost all the gains of the previous days. In New York, the Lebanese, the French, and the United Kingdom had prepared a U.N. resolution to implement a no-fly zone, and the world was waiting to see if Obama would join the effort. The White House meeting opened with an assessment of the situation on the ground in Libya. Qaddafi’s forces were on the outskirts of Ajdabiya, which supplies water and fuel to Benghazi. “The President was told Qaddafi is going to retake Ajdabiya in twenty-four hours,” a White House official who was in the meeting said. “And then the last stop on the train is Benghazi. If he got there, he would complete the military offensive, and that could be the place where he goes house to house and where a massacre could occur.”

Obama asked if a no-fly zone would prevent that grim scenario. His intelligence and military advisers said no. Qaddafi was using tanks, not war planes, to crush the rebellion. Obama asked his aides to come up with some more robust military options, and left for dinner. At a second meeting that night, he was presented with the option of pushing for a broader resolution that would allow for the U.S. to protect the Libyan rebels by bombing government forces. He instructed Susan Rice, the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., to pursue that option.

On March 17th, I interviewed Clinton in Tunis. She was sitting under a canopy by the hotel pool, eating breakfast. Although she had been noncommittal with the diplomats in France two days earlier, she now made it clear that the Obama Administration had made a decision. It was well known that she favored intervention, but she was frank about the difficulty in making such decisions. “I get up every morning and I look around the world,” she said. “People are being killed in Côte d’Ivoire, they’re being killed in the Eastern Congo, they’re being oppressed and abused all over the world by dictators and really unsavory characters. So we could be intervening all over the place. But that is not a—what is the standard? Is the standard, you know, a leader who won’t leave office in Ivory Coast and is killing his own people? Gee, that sounds familiar. So part of it is having to make tough choices and wanting to help the international community accept responsibility.”

Clinton insisted that the U.S. had to have regional support before it took action, and
emphasized that it was crucial that U.N. action had been supported by the Arab League. “So now we’re going to see whether the Security Council will support the Arab League. Not support the United States—support the Arab League. That is a significant difference. And for those who want to see the United States always acting unilaterally, it’s not satisfying. But, for the world we’re trying to build, where we have a lot of responsible actors who are willing to step up and lead, it is exactly what we should be doing.”

The French and the British were shocked by the quick turn of events. Instead of the President announcing the Administration’s position from the East Room of the White House, the U.N. envoy quietly proposed transforming a tepid resolution for a no-fly zone into a permission for full-scale military intervention in Libya. Some officials thought it was a trick. Was it possible that the Americans were trying to make the military options appear so bleak that China and Russia would be sure to block action?

Gradually, it became clear that the U.S. was serious. Clinton spoke with her Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, who had previously told her that Russia would “never never” support even a no-fly zone. The Russians agreed to abstain. Without the cover of the Russians, the Chinese almost never veto Security Council resolutions. The vote, on March 17th, was 10–0, with five abstentions. It was the first time in its sixty-six years that the United Nations authorized military action to pre-empt an “imminent massacre.” Tom Malinowski, the Washington director of Human Rights Watch, wrote, “It was, by any objective standard, the most rapid multinational military response to an impending human rights crisis in history.”

As the bombs dropped on Libyan tanks, President Obama made a point of continuing his long-scheduled trip to South America. He wanted to show that America has interests in the rest of the world, even as it was drawn into yet another crisis in the Middle East.

This spring, Obama officials often expressed impatience with questions about theory or about the elusive quest for an Obama doctrine. One senior Administration official reminded me what the former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said when asked what was likely to set the course of his government: “Events, dear boy, events.”

Obama has emphasized bureaucratic efficiency over ideology, and approached foreign policy as if it were case law, deciding his response to every threat or crisis on its own merits. “When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you’re going to get yourself into trouble,” he said in a recent interview with NBC News.

Obama’s reluctance to articulate a grand synthesis has alienated both realists and idealists. “On issues like whether to intervene in Libya there’s really not a compromise and consensus,” Slaughter said. “You can’t be a little bit realist and a little bit democratic when deciding whether or not to stop a massacre.”

Brzezinski, too, has become disillusioned with the President. “I greatly admire his insights and understanding. I don’t think he really has a policy that’s implementing those insights and
understandings. The rhetoric is always terribly imperative and categorical: ‘You must do this,’ ‘He must do that,’ ‘This is unacceptable.’ ” Brzezinski added, “He doesn’t strategize. He sermonizes.”

The one consistent thread running through most of Obama’s decisions has been that America must act humbly in the world. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Obama came of age politically during the post-Cold War era, a time when America’s unmatched power created widespread resentment. Obama believes that highly visible American leadership can taint a foreign-policy goal just as easily as it can bolster it. In 2007, Obama said, “America must show—through deeds as well as words—that we stand with those who seek a better life. That child looking up at the helicopter must see America and feel hope.”

In 2009 and early 2010, Obama was sometimes criticized for not acting at all. He was cautious during Iran’s Green Revolution and deferential to his generals during the review of Afghanistan strategy. But his response to the Arab Spring has been bolder. He broke with Mubarak at a point when some of the older establishment advised against it. In Libya, he overruled Gates and his military advisers and pushed our allies to adopt a broad and risky intervention. It is too early to know the consequences of these decisions. Libya appears to be entering a protracted civil war; American policy toward Mubarak frightened—and irritated—Saudi Arabia, where instability could send oil prices soaring. The U.S. keeps getting stuck in the Middle East.

Nonetheless, Obama may be moving toward something resembling a doctrine. One of his advisers described the President’s actions in Libya as “leading from behind.” That’s not a slogan designed for signs at the 2012 Democratic Convention, but it does accurately describe the balance that Obama now seems to be finding. It’s a different definition of leadership than America is known for, and it comes from two unspoken beliefs: that the relative power of the U.S. is declining, as rivals like China rise, and that the U.S. is reviled in many parts of the world. Pursuing our interests and spreading our ideals thus requires stealth and modesty as well as military strength. “It’s so at odds with the John Wayne expectation for what America is in the world,” the adviser said. “But it’s necessary for shepherding us through this phase.”

PHOTOGRAPH: AUGUST

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