What Obama Gets Right

Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On

By Gideon Rose, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, November, 2015

How should one judge a president’s handling of foreign policy? Some focus on what happens in a few lonely moments of crisis, casting the nation’s leader as Horatius at the bridge or Casey at the bat. But a better analogy would be a member of a relay team or a middle relief pitcher: somebody who takes over from a predecessor, does a hard job for a while, and then passes things on to the next guy.

In baseball, there are special statistics used to judge such players, the hold and the blown save, which essentially tally whether the pitcher’s team keeps or loses the lead while he’s in the game. Looked at in such a light, Barack Obama has done pretty well. Having inherited two wars and a global economic crisis from the George W. Bush administration—the foreign policy equivalent of runners on base with no outs—Obama has extricated the country from some old problems, avoided getting trapped in some new ones, and made some solid pickups on the side.

There have been errors, wild pitches, and lost opportunities. But like George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, Obama will likely pass on to his successor an overall foreign policy agenda and national power position in better shape than when he entered office, ones that the next administration can build on to improve things further. Given how many administrations fail even that limited test, such an accomplishment is worthy of praise rather than the contempt the administration’s foreign policy often receives.

The key to Obama’s success has been his grasp of the big picture: his appreciation of the liberal international order that the United States has nurtured over the last seven decades, together with his recognition that the core of that order needed to be salvaged by pulling back from misguided adventures and feuds in the global periphery. The president is variously painted as a softheaded idealist, a cold-blooded realist, or a naive incompetent. But he is actually best understood as an ideological liberal with a conservative temperament—somebody who felt that after a period of reckless overexpansion and belligerent unilateralism, the country’s long-term foreign policy goals could best be furthered by short-term retrenchment. In this, he was almost certainly correct, and with the necessary backpedaling having been accomplished, Washington can turn its attention to figuring out how to get the liberal order moving forward once again.

PRIMACY AND WORLD ORDER

For generations, the central challenge for U.S. foreign policy has been straightforward: consolidate, protect, and extend the liberal international order that the United States helped create after World War II. Reflecting on the nightmares of the interwar period, when unregulated markets and uncoordinated behavior led to economic disaster and the rise of aggressive dictatorships, Western policymakers in the 1940s set out to construct a global system that would
prevent such problems from recurring. They ended up doing a masterful job, weaving together several components of domestic and international affairs into a unified, expansive, and flexible structure that has proved more durable and beneficial than they could ever have imagined.

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At the core of the order are democracies with mixed economies, peacefully cooperating and trading with one another while nestling closely under an American security umbrella. That core is embedded in a variety of overlapping institutional structures, from the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations, to NATO and the European Union, to an endless array of cooperative bilateral, regional, and functional groupings. Because the order doesn’t discriminate on grounds of geography, race, religion, or other ascriptive characteristics, any country that wants to join and is prepared to play by the rules is allowed in, making it a potentially universal alliance that is constantly expanding. And because the order has so many aspects and points of entry, countries not ready to sign up for the whole package at once can ease into it over time, starting on the margins and progressing toward the core at their own pace.

This order has been the framework within which a great deal of economic, social, and political development has proceeded around the globe, to the lasting benefit of both the United States and the world at large. Its basic outlines were sketched before the postwar break with the Soviet Union, so instead of saying that the Cold War caused or defined the order, it is more accurate to say that the Soviet Union’s unwillingness to take part in the order caused the Cold War. What the superpower confrontation did was ensure that the order was implemented on a partial, rather than universal, basis at first and with substantial internal cohesion thanks to the external threat. It was because the Cold War and the Soviet Union were never the central parts of the story that their passing changed the world less than many expected, merely paving the way for the order’s extension into territory that was previously off-limits.

Led by prudent, committed internationalists, the George H. W. Bush administration handled American foreign policy well at the start of the post–Cold War era, giving the order a new lease on life in new circumstances. The administration used skillful diplomacy to smooth the end of decades of conflict, dampen the possible ripple effects of the Soviet collapse, and bring a newly reunified Germany fully inside the order’s institutional framework. It also responded to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait by assembling a coalition to push Saddam back and restore order in the Persian Gulf, nudged Israel and the Arabs toward peace negotiations, and managed U.S. finances responsibly.

The Clinton administration also handled things well. Its first National Security Strategy explicitly stated that the country’s prime foreign policy objective was “enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and containing a range of threats to our nation, our allies and our interests,” and it was generally successful in continuing its predecessor’s efforts along those lines. It promoted North American economic integration; expanded NATO into eastern Europe; reaffirmed the U.S.-Japan alliance; maintained the containment of rogue actors such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea; and promoted peace processes in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Northern Ireland. And it, too, managed U.S. finances responsibly.
From Somalia to Rwanda, Haiti to the Balkans, both the first Bush and the Clinton administrations committed various errors of omission and commission. They ignored some global problems, failed to solve others, and made still others worse. But on balance, competently executing a broadly similar course, they left the liberal order in better shape than they found it—larger, richer, more peaceful, more secure, more respected. At the turn of the millennium, the United States was more powerful than any country had been since ancient Rome, and its dominance was grudgingly accepted by many other powers because they were being allowed, and helped, to improve their lot as well. But it was not to last.

9/11 AND AFTER

As the 1990s wore on, the threat of great-power conflict receded and globalization took off. Terrorism became a growing concern, as ever-increasing waves of goods and peoples flooded across borders, presenting both targets and cover for rising numbers of violent nonstate actors. Handing the ball to its successor, the Clinton team warned about the danger of freelance terrorists such as the radical Islamist group known as al Qaeda.

The new Bush team had its own ideas, however, and concentrated instead on other security issues, such as Iraq and China. It kept the broad lines of U.S. foreign policy intact at first, even though it was less enthused about multilateralism than its predecessors and so distanced itself from various perceived constraints on American autonomy, such as the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Then, on 9/11, a score of terrorists from al Qaeda hijacked four civilian jets and flew them into targets in New York and Washington, killing thousands.

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It was inevitable that the attacks would make the fight against radical jihadists the top priority of American policy. And given the complexities involved, it was inevitable that this fight would last a long time and present many controversial policy choices. What was not inevitable was that the attacks would also produce a major shift in the United States’ approach to the world, the launching of a costly war in an unrelated country, and an enduring state of siege. Those things happened because Washington lost its head.

Bush administration officials could have responded to the attacks with chagrin and self-recrimination, conceding (at least tacitly) that their initial national security priorities had been incorrect. If they had done this, they would still have undertaken a military campaign against al Qaeda and its unrepentant Afghan hosts, strengthened global counterterrorist operations and intelligence gathering, and paid more attention to homeland security. But these actions would have been couched as defenses and expansions of the liberal order and would have capitalized on the global outpouring of anger and sympathy that the attacks had provoked. Instead, the administration lashed out. It clung to many of its earlier views and incorporated Iraq and other issues into a new foreign policy framework designed not simply to respond to the attacks or bolster the order but, as the president put it early on, to “rid the world of evil” through direct action.
The peculiarities of Middle Eastern politics and American hegemony also came into play here, offering a larger intellectual and structural context, a motive and opportunity for the deployment of U.S. power abroad. Since al Qaeda was part of an ideological movement with roots in the economic, social, and political dysfunction of the Middle East, a plausible argument could be made that the jihadist threat would persist until the region liberalized and modernized successfully. And the attacks occurred at precisely the moment when the United States had amassed extraordinary relative strength but had not yet deployed that strength in the furtherance of some truly ambitious world role.

The combination of these factors meant that the 9/11 attacks had the psychological effect of Pearl Harbor and the geopolitical effect of the 1950 communist invasion of South Korea. They instilled fear and a desire for revenge, loosened the domestic constraints on the deployment of American power, and led not simply to increased counterterrorist efforts but also to a grand campaign to achieve total security by fundamentally transforming a broad swath of the world, often at the point of a gun.

The campaign seemed to go well at first. Within months, all members of the organization responsible for the attacks had been killed, captured, or driven into hiding. The Afghan government that had supported the attackers was overthrown and replaced with a pro-Western regime. And new measures to improve security and intelligence were set up in the United States and beyond. But the ball kept rolling.

The Bush team settled on Iraq as its next target, and to justify its actions, it developed a new doctrine of preventive war, deployed exaggerated and deceptive rhetoric, and turned a debatable policy choice into a starkly politicized clash of patriotic boldness versus treasonous cowardice. The invasion itself proceeded smoothly, but the venture ran into trouble when it turned out that little practical planning had been done for the post-Saddam era. A gradual, agonizing descent into chaos ensued, made even more unpalatable by the revelation that Saddam’s supposed prohibited weapons programs had been largely notional. The exposure of prisoner abuse, meanwhile, in conjunction with the administration’s embrace of torture, rendition, indefinite detention, and ever-increasing electronic surveillance, fed suspicions that the United States was abandoning its values in the quest to save them.

By the end of George W. Bush’s first term, his eponymous doctrine was a dead letter, with each of its three pillars—“preemption,” regime change, and a Manichaean division between friends and enemies—discredited and discarded. The soaring rhetoric of his second inaugural address masked the fact that a reaction had already set in, with many of the administration’s hard-liners and their policies having left the building.

In his second term, Bush eventually embraced a bold course shift in Iraq that helped turn the tide of the conflict there (at least temporarily), and the administration ultimately made impressive progress on issues from global health and international development to piracy, nuclear proliferation, and regional diplomacy. But even the administration’s vaunted hawkishness couldn’t prevent setbacks, such as North Korea’s nuclearization or Russia’s invasion of Georgia. And the first term’s mistakes overshadowed all, tarnishing the country’s reputation, souring its relationships, and trapping it in thankless, seemingly endless foreign interventions. And then, to
top it off, Bush’s final months in office saw a financial collapse that sent the national and global economy into deep recession.

The Bush administration’s post-9/11 course was neither the heroic success story supporters claimed nor the nefarious conspiracy its harshest critics charged. It took on enemies worth opposing. But it was deeply flawed in both conception and execution, because it tried to muscle history forward, regardless of resistance. It cast its net too wide, taking on too many tasks of too great difficulty with too much haste, too few resources, and too little deliberation. It was a classic cautionary tale of unchecked power goaded into hubris, followed by folly, followed by nemesis. And as a result, Bush bequeathed to his successor a divided country, an economic catastrophe, and two ongoing wars, one of them heading in the wrong direction.

CORE CURRICULUM

The Obama administration came into office determined to reverse what it saw as the Bush administration’s mistakes, to “rebalance our long-term priorities so that we successfully move beyond today’s wars, and focus our attention and resources on a broader set of countries and challenges,” as the administration’s initial National Security Strategy put it.

The new team’s first major order of business was dealing with the financial crisis, which it was able to master with the help of a creative and activist Federal Reserve. In Iraq, Obama traded the calm generated by the surge for an orderly and complete military withdrawal, gambling (incorrectly, as it turned out) that the gains recently made could be sustained indefinitely even absent a significant U.S. presence or major U.S. involvement. And in Afghanistan, for all of the president’s anguished huffing and puffing, he did essentially the same thing on a later schedule, putting in place his own surge to gain some stability before heading toward the exit.

Presented with new opportunities for major military interventions in later years, moreover, the president either refused or authorized only the minimum necessary to achieve limited goals. From Syria to Ukraine, Yemen to Iran, the Obama administration has been determined to avoid getting sucked into yet another quagmire. Rather than boots on the ground or usually even bombers in the air, this president’s national security tools of choice have been drones, sanctions, and negotiations.

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Obama’s critics have cast all of this as naiveté, weakness, or self-hatred. The president just doesn’t understand the dangers of an unruly world, the thinking runs, or is too incompetent to prevent such a world’s emergence, or is actually eager to bring it about because he thinks American power has done more harm than good. Obama deliberately chose “a foreign policy designed to produce American decline,” sums up the columnist Charles Krauthammer. But instead of being mollified, the nation’s enemies are being emboldened and are surging forward.
 Retreat is turning into rout, the argument goes, and the administration will pass on to its successor a newly contentious world in which American interests and values will increasingly be challenged.

The critics are right about the downsizing of the U.S. global role and the withdrawal from exposed forward positions. But what they miss is that Obama’s retrenchment is not universal, his diffidence not complete. The administration has not abandoned traditional U.S. grand strategy; it has tried to rescue it from its predecessor’s mismanagement. Obama is prepared to save the core of the liberal order—but to do so, he is willing to sacrifice the periphery, both functional and regional.

The United States, he noted in 2010, has “created webs of commerce, supported an international architecture of laws and institutions, and spilled American blood in foreign lands, not to build an empire, but to shape a world in which more individuals and nations could determine their own destiny, and live with the peace and dignity they deserve.” In order to get back to that task, however, the nation needed to “pursue a strategy of national renewal and global leadership—a strategy that rebuilds the foundation of American strength and influence.” Above all, that meant distinguishing between wants and needs, and letting some issues and areas slip to the back burner.

As Obama put it when addressing the UN General Assembly in 2013, talking about the Middle East in particular:

The United States of America is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests. . . . We will confront external aggression against our allies and partners. . . . We will ensure the free flow of energy. . . . We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people. . . . And finally, we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction.

“To say that these are America’s core interests,” Obama continued, “is not to say that they are our only interests.” Other goals, such as regional peace, prosperity, democracy, and human rights, were also important. “But . . . we can rarely achieve these objectives through unilateral American action, particularly through military action,” he said. Instead, they could and should be pursued through longer, broader group efforts—policies that would erect sustainable incentive structures to nudge things forward over time.

THE DOCTRINE IN PRACTICE

The distinction between core and periphery helps make sense of the administration’s actions across a range of different cases. In late 2013, for example, Ukraine was about to improve its relations with Europe. Worried that a crucial ally might change its orientation, Russian President Vladimir Putin bribed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych not to make the move. That triggered a series of popular protests that brought down the Yanukovych government—at which point Putin sent in Russian forces to seize the Crimean Peninsula and began giving military support to Russian-allied rebels in eastern Ukraine.
Shocked by the Russian leader’s brazen brutality, some hawks argued that this was a replay of the 1930s and called for a bold military response to stop Russian revanchism in its tracks. But the Obama administration demurred, content to refuse recognition of the land grab, organize targeted sanctions against Russia, support the government in Kiev, and keep the situation contained. The reason for this balanced reaction—neither fighting nor appeasing—was that Obama recognized that Ukraine was a core interest for Russia but a peripheral one for the West. So while it was necessary for Russia to pay a price for its aggression, it was not necessary for the United States to go to war itself over the issue.

This policy seems eminently sensible: NATO members have an ironclad security guarantee of American protection, which Washington will unquestionably enforce if necessary. But Ukraine is not a member of NATO; it is still part of Europe’s strategic periphery, rather than part of its core. The United States did not intervene in similar situations in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, or Poland in 1981; why should it be expected to do so in Ukraine in 2014? Like those other countries have, Ukraine will probably join the liberal order eventually, when circumstances permit. But it is not the United States’ job to fight to bring it in before then.

With regard to the Middle East, similarly, hawks fault Obama for letting conflict rage and turbulence spread. And it is true that the American withdrawal from Iraq and nonintervention in Syria were ultimately followed by the rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS, a vicious terrorist ministate, in the badlands of those countries.

But looking at recent history, the president concluded that the region’s various domestic problems are neither easily solvable nor his to solve. After all, as the former administration official Philip Gordon has noted, “In Iraq, the U.S. intervened and occupied, and the result was a costly disaster. In Libya, the U.S. intervened and did not occupy, and the result was a costly disaster. In Syria, the U.S. neither intervened nor occupied, and the result is a costly disaster.” And in Yemen, one might add, the United States relied on drone strikes and active diplomacy, and the result is a costly disaster. If the Middle East is bent on convulsing itself in costly disasters, as seems unfortunately true these days, trying to play a constructive role from the sidelines rather than getting embroiled directly represents not weakness but prudence.

As for the administration’s signature diplomatic achievement, the Iran nuclear deal, it exemplifies Obama’s broader approach to foreign policy. Having pledged as a candidate to be willing to talk to any country without preconditions to see if relations could be improved, once elected, Obama spent years doggedly pursuing a less conflictual relationship with Tehran. Judging that the Islamic Republic was not about to collapse, he gave a cold shoulder to the opposition Green Movement that sprang up after Iran’s disputed 2009 presidential election. When the Iranian government rebuffed his initial efforts at reconciliation, he worked with other countries to craft a tightened net of economic and financial sanctions. And when Iran decided it did want to negotiate after all, he invested substantial effort and political capital in trying to make the talks succeed. The result was a solid arms control agreement trading sanctions relief for a decadelong pause in Iran’s quest for a bomb. No war, no appeasement, a team effort with other great powers to try to come up with a practical solution to a significant but limited problem, and the creation of conditions in which progress might be made on broader issues over time—all vintage Obama.
In Asia, finally, the United States has long provided for regional security and stability, creating an environment in which countries from Japan and South Korea to Taiwan and the Philippines could reap the economic, social, and political benefits of hard work and self-discipline. China’s spectacular rise in recent decades has created both opportunities for and threats to this system: the successful and peaceful incorporation of the People’s Republic further into the order would bring vast benefits, but military conflict with China could bring equally vast costs. And so here the Obama team has tried to present both a welcome and a warning, telling China to play by the rules or else.

Asia’s main sea-lanes are crucial parts of the global commons that the United States has to protect to maintain the order as a whole, and the region is home to many important U.S. allies. So following on the efforts of its predecessor (which were unusually nuanced and constructive in this part of the world), the Obama administration has tried to reassure U.S. allies that Washington will remain engaged and protect them over the long term. It signed ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. And the president has spent a great deal of effort and political capital to negotiate and secure passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a major trade deal that will not only deepen the liberal order in general but also bolster and lock in strong relationships with the countries involved—and which will remain open to Chinese participation whenever China is prepared to meet the criteria for entry. Whether this delicately constructed matrix of incentives and disincentives can keep Chinese behavior on a constructive course over a long period of time is unclear, but no other approach seems more likely to do so.

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Obama has certainly made his share of foreign policy mistakes, and he has been better at strategy than at implementation. He came into office overly confident that his mere presence and speechifying could dramatically improve matters, and the gap between his words and his deeds has been a repeatedly self-inflicted wound. His initial flirtation with leftist pieties about nuclear disarmament predictably came to nothing. His handling of the “redline” on Syria’s use of chemical weapons—first casually announcing a major commitment, then dithering about living up to it, then frantically tossing the ball to Congress for a decision—was a case study in embarrassingly amateurish improvisation. His failure to try harder to keep Iraq on track after the U.S. withdrawal helped speed the disintegration there (a mistake the administration has tacitly learned from and is trying to avoid repeating in Afghanistan). And his attempt at an immaculate intervention in Libya ended up repeating in miniature the Bush administration’s basic mistake in Iraq (toppling a government without a plan for what comes next, thus trading tyranny for chaos).

But even taken together, these mistakes do not outweigh the improvements Obama has made in the United States’ global situation. Refusing to accept responsibility for domestic political outcomes in troubled countries in the developing world has been understandably controversial, but it is a necessary step toward cutting losses and bringing American commitments into line with American capabilities. Using diplomacy to successfully reestablish relations with countries such as Iran and Cuba and give them what might be thought of as a “path to citizenship” in the order helps strengthen rather than weaken it. And having the self-assurance to recognize that in the long run, open societies will beat closed ones—so that countries such as Russia, China, and
Iran will see their positions weaken rather than strengthen eventually, if only the fort can be held—represents a rediscovery of the best lessons of past American diplomacy.

THIS TIME IS NOT DIFFERENT

Listening to discussions of American national security these days, one would think the country were in truly dire straits. “The world has never been more dangerous than it is today,” according to Senator Marco Rubio. “The world is literally about to blow up,” says Senator Lindsey Graham. Even people who are not running for the Republican presidential nomination apparently agree. In 2012, General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared, “In my personal military judgment, formed over 38 years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now.” In 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said that the threat from ISIS “is beyond anything that we’ve seen.”

To use a technical term, this is hogwash. The United States today may be richer, stronger, and safer than it has ever been; if not, it is certainly close to it. It has a defense budget equivalent to those of the next seven countries combined and together with its allies accounts for three-quarters of all global defense spending. It has unparalleled power-projection capabilities and a globe-spanning intelligence network. It has the world’s reserve currency, the world’s largest economy, and the highest growth rate of any major developed country. It has good demographics, manageable debt, and dynamic, innovating companies that are the envy of the world. And it is at the center of an ever-expanding liberal order that has outwitted, outplayed, and outlasted every rival for three-quarters of a century.

But the gloom-and-doom talk should not come as a surprise, because it has been a recurring refrain throughout the country’s modern history. There seems to be something psychologically appealing about fear and pessimism, as they never go away, no matter what the circumstances. In 1961, for example, during the heyday of the American century, Henry Kissinger was moved to start a book on U.S. foreign policy with this declaration:

The United States cannot afford another decline like that which has characterized the past decade and a half. Fifteen years more of a deterioration of our position in the world such as we have experienced since World War II would find us reduced to Fortress America in a world in which we had become largely irrelevant.

A less excitable former official writing pseudonymously in Daedalus the following year was closer to the mark:

The fruit of fifteen years of American policy is at hand: political and economic unity and economic progress in Western Europe. If an integrated Europe and the United States join together for the common defense of the free world, if we collaborate in constructing a sound international financial system, if we provide from the vast resources of the Atlantic region the capital and markets for the less developed countries of the world, then the conditions that make possible a secure and increasingly prosperous world will have been created.
Add eastern Europe, much of Asia and Latin America, and parts of Africa and the Middle East to “the Atlantic region,” as we can now do, and the point should come through even more strongly.

The genius of Western policymakers in the 1940s was to recognize—finally, after so much treasure had been wasted and so much blood spilt—that international relations could be a team sport rather than an individual one. The dense network of partnerships they created rested not on charity, altruism, or self-abnegation but on what Tocqueville called “self-interest rightly understood.” They realized that isolation and autarky led to weakness rather than strength, poverty rather than riches, and vulnerability rather than security. And so they started to coordinate their actions, pool their resources, and forgo the quest for short-term relative gains vis-à-vis one another. As the order’s leading theorist, John Ikenberry, argues, instead of seeing cooperation as an alternative to U.S. leadership, American strategists came to see that “alliances, partnerships, multilateralism, [and] democracy . . . [were] the tools of U.S. leadership.”

Backed by American wealth and power, more often than not deployed on behalf of the team as a whole rather than narrow U.S. concerns, the liberal order has proved capacious and resilient. It has faced repeated external challenges over the years but has managed to beat them back and hold the field. It has also faced repeated internal challenges, from policymakers and publics too shortsighted or reckless or imprudent to maintain it in good working order.

Obama took office convinced that many of his predecessor’s poor choices had let the order down; he was determined to get it back on track and avoid major new missteps. His seemingly modest second-term goals—“don’t do stupid shit”; hit “singles” and “doubles”—rest on an immodest but justified sense that time and tide are generally on the side of the order rather than the side of its few remaining enemies. History suggests that’s a good bet to make.