

OBAMA AT THE TWO-YEAR MARK: NO "MORNING IN AMERICA"

David T. Jones

Two years after the election, President Barack Obama is under water domestically but still afloat internationally. There have been clear foreign affairs successes: managing a potentially fractious "team of rivals" in foreign policy; "resetting" foreign attitudes toward the USA; a dare-not-speak-its-name victory in Iraq; and collegial relations with Canada. The litany of failure, however, is longer: The Middle East; Iran; North Korea; Venezuela; Russia; and counterterrorism security. Afghanistan will be defining: an Iraq-level outcome will tip the scales to "success."

Deux ans après son accession au pouvoir, Barack Obama a perdu pied sur le front intérieur mais a réussi à surnager sur la scène internationale. Son bilan en matière d'affaires étrangères comporte en effet d'indéniables succès, affirme David T. Jones : gestion d'une « équipe de rivaux » potentiellement explosive en politique étrangère, « rajustement » des perceptions suscitées par les États-Unis à l'étranger, victoire à la Pyrrhus mais victoire tout de même en Irak, retour à des relations collégiales avec le Canada. Mais la liste de ses échecs est plus longue : Moyen-Orient, Iran, Corée du Nord, Venezuela, Russie, contre-terrorisme et sécurité. Aussi l'Afghanistan jouera-t-il un rôle décisif, puisqu'un dénouement de type irakien ferait pencher la balance du côté des « succès ».



Immediately prior to the 2008 US election, I wrote an article combining hubris and humility ("Foreign Policy: Obama vs. McCain," *Policy Options*, October 2008). I played prognosticator regarding the foreign policy directions that a "President McCain" and a "President Obama" could take. The effort was both easy and hard: easy because great global powers are driven by long-standing interests and commitments; unless overturned by political revolution, their policies change at the periphery rather than at the core. And hard because most observers are interested not in the unchanging core but rather in the mutable peripheries.

Consequently, I noted that those expecting dramatic change would be disappointed. "You do not spin super-tankers on dimes; the sun will not set in the east."

Thus there would have been no question that the United States would continue its devotion to, *inter alia*, promoting democratic governments and free market capitalism, and expanding international trade, existential human rights and "green" approaches (so long as they were economically painless). We would maintain baseline security commitments to our alliances (NATO, NORAD), resist aggression (sometimes by force of arms), promote arms control (particularly nuclear nonproliferation), combat terrorism regardless of the motives of the terrorists and support (gingerly at times) various international organizations such as the United Nations, regardless of their flaws.

But after such motherhood and *putin* verities, predictions falter. And the "best laid plans" not only do not survive contact with the enemy (armed combat) but fall victim to "events"—those "black swan" occurrences that come at a society like 9/11's multiple aircraft hits. The media sneered at former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for touting the problem of "unknown unknowns," but it may have been his most prescient observation.

So what has happened in the past two years? Well, there is the obvious: the alternative history postulated for "President McCain" will never happen. The United States took a blindfolded leap into the "hope and change" abyss, praying it would involve a soft landing. Unfortunately, many judge the interim results as "so far, so bad." Domestically, the fiscal storms that battered the denouement of the Bush administration have not lifted; the economic hurricane continues. The Great Recession persists with unemployment and underemployment depressingly high, consumer confidence near historic lows, GNP growing very slowly and business apparently willing to wait out the administration's intentions in tax, investment and fiscal policy. While the prophets of a 1930s Great Depression doom have been proved wrong (for now), it is far from "morning in America."

And what President Obama has accomplished in bank and auto industry bailouts and stimulus packages for housing has

come at vast expense, generating gasp-producing deficits and cringe-inducing additions to national debt. These, plus his benchmark “Obamacare” health plan, are intensely polarizing; they have infuriated partisans on the right. They have made it impossible to act on key elements desired by the left (energy and environment legislation, immigration reform, gay rights). And they have left

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independents disconcerted that the relentlessly partisan atmosphere has not mitigated, as the US government remains far from any collegial approach to vital social and economic issues. The sneer from the right is “How do you like the ‘hokey changey’ thing now?” The riposte from the left is “You do not go back to the future.”

The truism remains that “it’s the economy, stupid,” for US electoral success or failure. Domestic affairs trump foreign affairs. Thus by definition, the forthcoming November midterm elections will disconcert Democrats; it is a historical reality that a president’s party virtually always loses seats in the midterm election after his first election. The question will be how many seats will be lost, but predictions of congressional catastrophe are probably overblown.

Nevertheless, it is useful to examine foreign affairs against the backdrop of what President Obama sought to achieve. The “short” story is that his lack of success has been more noteworthy than his success; however, before “burying” the president, it is instructive to “praise” him.

Keeping the Team of Rivals pulling together. At the beginning of the administration, enough “secretaries of state” were named to suggest daunting

problems controlling foreign policy. the Vice-President (Joe Biden), the National Security Adviser (General James Jones, the Defence Secretary (Robert Gates), the UN Ambassador (Susan Rice) and assorted special envoys (Richard Holbrooke — South Asia and George Mitchell — Middle East) all had the credentials to be secretary of state. Indeed, the individual

with the weakest pure foreign policy resumé was the one holding the position: Hillary Clinton. But instead of a bloodbath over who would spin the wheel at the helm of the foreign policy dreadnought, they have sorted themselves out reasonably well. The intelligence community, if not sorted out, is at least quiet. Rice at the UN has been invisible; Mitchell and Holbrooke might as well be. Jones at the National Security Council has focused on coordinating rather than attempting to run foreign policy; Biden’s misadventures have had little consequence.

And the cooperative collegiality between Clinton and Gates, both personally and institutionally, has been breathtakingly positive. They have ignored media nattering of “militarization of foreign policy” and focused on advancing US government foreign policy objectives. They testify jointly before Congress; Gates repeatedly urges Congress to fund the State Department more generously; they agree that State should have (and should take) a stronger role in managing the politico-military challenges that Third World failed or failing states frequently epitomize. Whether such comity persists following the departure of either (or both) will be defining regarding US approaches to post-Cold War foreign policy. Adroitly, the

President has left them alone to do their own things, and each has been vocally loyal.

That reset button cliché. George W. Bush had many virtues, but long before the end of his presidency, he was loathed by friends and enemies alike. If there were times when US prestige around the world was at lower ebb, they escaped memory. Indeed, one had the impression that substantial numbers would have happily diced him into small portions and roasted the remnants over an open fire. It is not that being loved is necessary for effective foreign policy, but being actively loathed or despised makes even minimalist proposals difficult to implement and anything complex and/or controversial becomes de facto impossible.

President Obama has escaped this tar pit. With a series of speeches before and after his election, from Berlin to Cairo, the President combined apologies for US error with commitments to do better this time around. The most obvious “reset button” was to be with the Russians — to move away from implicit confrontation over the Russian’s actions in the former Soviet Union, particularly Georgia, and work toward agreement in areas such as arms control.

The downside to “reset” has been the slow deflation of overinflated expectations, especially in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the President has remained remarkably popular overseas — considerably more so than in the United States. We can assume that the White House might quietly wish that non-Americans (particularly Canadians) could vote in the November elections.

Iraq — the closet success. On August 31, the President announced withdrawal of the last tranche of US combat troops, leaving 50,000 in country to continue training, support and assistance to Iraqi armed forces. The result of the long, brutal, expensive and divisive operation is a success that, so far as Democrats are concerned, dare not speak its name. But when more people

are killed in Caracas than in Baghdad (and more in Venezuela than in Iraq), we have at least a qualified victory. To be sure, it could all go south: an excess of democracy that has left the country without a functioning government five months after elections; unresolved economic and cultural tensions between

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Kurds and the rest of Iraq; resurgent religious fighting that could bring the country again to its knees. But it remains galling for Democrats, who had invested heavily in US failure in Iraq — from opposing the war to begin to opposing Bush’s double-down “surge” of troop increases — to find that the US has bumbled and/or lucked through the muck. We eliminated an egregiously vicious dictator and have given Iraqi society an opportunity it could not have contemplated in 2003.

Afghanistan — still too close to call. In contrast to Iraq, Afghanistan was supposed to be the “good war.” That is, there was a reason for US forces to be in Afghanistan — the sanctuary and training ground for al-Qaeda terrorists who perpetrated 9/11. The US also has a “never again” mantra — never again will we permit Afghanistan to become a safe haven for terrorists. It would be nice to have young women fearlessly seeking education and political self-fulfillment in bikinis; it would be delightful if little boys could fly their kites; it would be gratifying if wheat crops could replace opium production. But the bottom line remains: the US wants a country unable to export terrorists.

In many aspects, this objective is relatively simple: sit on our bayonets, regardless of the discomfort, and pay the costs to maintain such a bottom line. Coalition combat losses have been societally trivial (fewer than 1,000 US combat deaths in nine years — when we suffered more than 4,000 dead in Iraq and 2,500 dead on D-Day alone in

1944). But we are now a “short-haul” society; no longer are we doing long-term commitments. Thus the problem comes when the US moves beyond the minimal into “nation building,” which is its current endeavour. After excruciating decision delay, Obama reinforced America’s commitment. The US has

again “surged” some of its finest combat units and has defenestrated a combat commander who spoke unfortunately blunt opinions about the powerful, replacing him with an even more technically proficient officer, General David Petraeus, architect of the successful Iraqi surge, who will also speak truth about the powerful but will do so *sotto voce*. The US should be able to accomplish its Afghan objectives — but not if it holds to the semi-commitment to begin removing surged forces in July 2011.

For some the administration is blameless; inability to resolve generation-long problems in 18 months isn’t necessarily failure. Lamentably, however, in contrast to the Hippocratic oath of “First do no harm,” the administration has worsened several traditional problems.

Security and the Gitmo problem. The US has been lucky with the incompetence of terrorists: the 2009 Christmas “panty bomber” was thwarted by alert passengers, rather than security procedures, from exploding Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Ontario. A gormless homeland security czar has hardly reassured citizenry. And the bombastic commitment to close Guantanamo’s security facility in a year was aborted when nobody would accept the worst cases — not even US maximum-security prisons.

Middle East mess. For a generation, nobody has lost money betting against peace in the Middle East. And no observer should mistake motion for movement. Thus the new round of dis-

cussions in Washington between Israelis and Palestinians raises hopes for success but could be doomed to failure. Essentially, the absence of the third party in the equation (Hamas) dooms discussions to circularity at best. Neither Palestinian nor Israeli leadership has the political strength for hard compromises necessary for agreement.

Unfortunately, early in his administration, the President’s rhetoric raised regional expectations in his Cairo speech. The effort led nowhere and, worst of all, was followed by avoidable contretemps with Israel over tertiary issues. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has never been a favourite of liberal Democrats (exemplified by former president Clinton), but the disrespect President Obama demonstrated by visiting Egypt and Turkey (but not Israel or Greece) and a holding-his-nose meeting in Washington did not make Netanyahu more flexible. Surprised? Instead, by creating at least the impression of conflict, the administration emboldened Hamas/Hezbollah and other hostile regional actors to refuse serious engagement with Israel. In fairness, it must be said that the body language between Obama and Netanyahu, at the White House rollout of the new round of peace talks in September, was much more positive.

Resetting Russia. Moscow’s and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s objectives are transparent: resumed hegemony over the shards of the former USSR. In hopes of gaining Russian support against the Iranian nuclear program, the administration sacrificed a legitimate missile defence system that Poland and the Czech Republic desired. No payback on Tehran’s nukes, but a strategic arms agreement (New START) that despite the assurances of the administration leaves skeptical senators unconvinced. There are always opponents to arms control with Russia; however, the Obama administration may end up with “the worst of both worlds” — a rejected (or long-delayed) treaty or a treaty leaving unresolved doubts over verification and

potential constraints on US antimissile defence.

Iran — the problem worsens. Tehran continues its sprint toward nuclear weapons capability. Its rhetorical hostility to Israel is apocryphal; words count — we must believe they reflect objectives. Nothing the administration has done has slowed the pace: sanctions, admonitions, hectoring, all have been futile. The President offered an open hand; the Iranians spat in it. And ostensible partners in stopping the Iranian nuclear program have largely ignored our pleas: for instance, the Russians are giving technical support in loading the Iranian “peaceful” nuclear reactor. What we may conclude is that for the past decade, the US has made maximum bi/multilateral efforts to neuter Iran’s nuclear weapons program so when the Iranians are on the verge of a completed weapon, military strikes can be justified as “a last resort.” Is regime change the only answer?

The North Korean conundrum. Is North Korean leadership “crazy like a fox” or just crazy? Regardless of by whom or with what motivations Pyongyang is a nuclear weapons state. We are unable to engage any of the regional actors (China, Russia, Japan, South Korea) with larger dogs in the fight than ours to take the lead in dealing with the North. So Pyongyang torpedoes a South Korean naval vessel, sinking it and killing 46 sailors. The US remonstrates; the UN passes more sanctions; but we remain at a loss to resolve a threat that also cries out for regime change. But the costs of the status quo are far less than those of remedial action.

The rising China problem. China now has the world’s second-largest economy. Its global political and military power is moving to match its economic strength. The US government is fumbling to find policy to balance its massive financial dependence on Chinese loans with our desire for Chinese support to deal with Iran and North Korea. Will we end by sacrificing Taiwan to Beijing’s revanchism? Obama’s November 2009 East Asia trip conveyed the impression “I came, I saw, I left,” with no obvious substantive consequence.



Jason Ransom, PMO

President Barack Obama in Ottawa in February 2009. David Jones writes that the Canada-US file is one that he has reason to smile about.

Latin laments. Obama’s arrival supposedly would mollify Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez — who lost no love on George W. Bush. The President took the high road in offering friendship. Chavez termed the president an ignoramus and offered him a book excoriating US policy toward Latin America. Was Dubya right?

And a final success: bilateral relations with Canada. Making his first foreign trip to Ottawa — even for a few hours — brightened a February day. A few public words and a pat on the back for the Prime Minister (without calling him “Steve”) have left an enduring impression. Or at least the “Obama cook-

ie” (a large sugar cookie with a red maple leaf that he purchased during the visit) still sells vigorously in the Byward Market. It is judged not on culinary merits but for its symbolic effect. That the President is now less popular in the US than in Canada is as irrelevant as the taste of the cookie.

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