

Did Obama Help Oust Mubarak?

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WASHINGTON -- The on-again, off-again and [finally truly on-again end](#) of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year dictatorship whipsawed the world -- not least the White House, which from the beginning struggled to keep up with events.

As the streets of Cairo shook with chants of "Egypt is free!" and the army took power as Mubarak fled the capital, it was unclear how much influence the Obama administration ultimately played in the dramatic outcome.

Or how much say it will have in persuading Egypt's new leaders to lift the country's emergency law, schedule credible elections and keep the peace with its neighbor Israel.

"We are witnessing the Berlin Wall moment for Egypt and possibly the entire Middle East," said Richard Grenell, a former George W. Bush administration spokesman at the United Nations.

Yet the jubilation in Egypt did not result from any "[tear down this wall](#)" moments by an American president. It followed instead from nearly three weeks of popular uprisings by fed-up Egyptians. There was a message clearly relayed even as Washington's response at time was [muddled](#) and contradictory as it struggled to deal with the imminent exit of a longtime ally whose shortcomings it long overlooked in the name of regional stability.

"If I were the president, I would not want to take credit" for Mubarak's departure, said Boston University international relations professor Arthur Hulnick, a former Air Force and CIA intelligence officer.

Indeed, at his last news conference as White House spokesman, Robert Gibbs underscored that the challenges facing Egypt are "not going to be solved here. We will continue to play a constructive role in helping this process along but this started with the Egyptian people and it will end with the Egyptian people."

Hulnick said it wasn't just the White House that was left [irate](#) and [flummoxed](#) by Mubarak's surprise speech Thursday in which he defied all expectations that he would step down. Egypt's military was not willing to deal with the fallout in the streets sparked by Mubarak's stubborn refusal to leave.

"Somebody said to him 'This is a mistake. You're out.' I suspect it was one of the generals," Hulnick said.

Yes, administration officials and envoys worked the phones to gently push Mubarak out. And Defense Secretary Robert Gates did tell Egypt's defense minister, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, that the United States would not lift a finger to keep Mubarak in power, Hulnick said.

"Whether we were the major influence, though, I'm sure not," Hulnick said. "Mubarak understood that no one was going to stand by him and he had no choice" but to leave.

"Ultimately, this was about Egypt and not the United States," said Michael Rubin, a Middle East expert at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "Had Obama sided with the protesters initially, rather than tried to straddle the fence, the United States would have far greater leverage now."

Perhaps, but as Obama watched Mubarak's speech Thursday as he flew back to Washington on Air Force One, he decided he would weigh in with his [longest statement](#) to date. He demanded that the Egyptian government "move swiftly to explain the changes that have been made, and to spell out in clear and unambiguous language the step-by-step process that will lead to democracy."

The next day, Mubarak was on a plane out of Cairo.

The libertarian [Cato Institute](#) congratulated Obama for staying out of "a purely internal matter" and not caving to calls by some for a "heavy-handed U.S. role in this whole affair."

Columnist David Ignatius [wrote](#) before Mubarak's ultimate departure that the Tahrir Square uprising was "truly 'made in Egypt.' President Obama got hammered at home for not trying to dictate the outcome, but he was right in his initial instinct that America can influence events best when it does so quietly, behind the scenes."

Aaron David Miller, a Woodrow Wilson Center scholar and veteran Middle East peace negotiator, said before Mubarak left that Obama "talked too much. There was no need to provide daily weather reports" during the crisis. Yet no matter what the administration said or did in public or behind the scenes, America's ability to micromanage the domestic affairs of other nations is limited.

"We're a modern-day Gulliver tied up by tiny tribes that don't share our interests and tied up by our own allusions," Miller said. "Our power in this broken, angry region has always been limited, and when democracy comes to Egypt, in whatever form ... the U.S.-Egyptian strategic relationship will be downsized."

Mubarak's exit leaves a power vacuum.

The real danger has "just begun," Rubin said. "No one knows who is in charge, and because this revolution lacked an organization, there could be a free-for-all amongst groups that care more about power than democracy and reform."

Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, agreed. "It remains to be seen how much true political reform will take place and whether the military and the elite establishment will really share power with a newly strengthened opposition," he said. "In all likelihood, the transition will be long and bumpy."

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