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As president, Barack Obama set out to improve the U.S.'s image abroad. What went wrong?

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A new hope

Before Barack Obama entered the White House, before he even became the Democratic Party's nominee, the Illinois senator was already claiming that as president, he would be uniquely qualified to help make the world a safer place.

He articulated this view during a November 2007 interview with New Hampshire Public Radio. Seated inside the Concord, N.H., studios at the beginning of what would be a punishing primary race, Obama confidently imagined the day of his inauguration, at which point, he said, the world "looks at America differently."

Why? Just by virtue of who he was.

As a result of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. at that point had a poor reputation in the Middle East and the broader Muslim world, and it was there that Obama believed he could make the greatest difference.

He proffered that because he was raised in Indonesia, he had come to understand the Muslim point of view, and that Muslims would in turn appreciate his connection to them.

"I think the world will have confidence that I am listening to them and that our future and our security is tied up with our ability to work with other countries in the world," he said in that interview. "That will ultimately make us safer."

His words perhaps reveal Obama's naiveté, if not his hubris, that his largely untested personal brand could shape the course of world events and transform nation states.

Even so, this message of hope, of new beginnings, both in domestic and foreign affairs, resonated with the American electorate as well as an international audience.

By the time he took office in 2009, it was clear Obama was intent on restoring America's image abroad.

It had been badly stained by George W. Bush's prosecution of the War on Terror, which included the use of waterboarding and other controversial interrogation techniques, continued detention of enemy combatants in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and, of course, the quagmire in Iraq.

The Obama Doctrine followed a policy of retrenchment. Obama was not an isolationist, but he wanted to lessen the U.S. military's footprint in the world, and instead focus on making it a force for justice and conflict resolution.

He had come to power pledging to pull the U.S. out of its costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, fashioning himself as the "extricator-in-chief," according to Aaron David Miller, a former adviser to Republican and Democratic secretaries of state.

Obama wanted to avoid the military adventurism of his predecessor. The unofficial policy, as he would tell senior aides in private, was "Don't do stupid shit."

That attitude endeared him to longtime allies such as Germany and France, which had been put off by Bush's hawkish foreign policy.

At the same time, Obama hoped to forge better relationships with traditional adversaries — saying, for example, that he was prepared to meet leaders of rogue nations such as Iran, North Korea and Cuba without preconditions.

But Obama would soon learn the limits of his power to persuade and the ramifications of a U.S. that seeks, as one of his advisers put it, to "lead from behind."

As Obama prepares to leave the White House, the world hardly seems more secure than it was at the beginning of his tenure.

There's a strong consensus that he was naively optimistic in his worldview and ultimately lost his resolve in the face of the most urgent foreign challenges of his presidency, most notably Afghanistan, Russia and Syria.

"He will be judged to have gone from Bush 43 risk-readiness," says Miller, "to a policy of risk aversion which went too far the other way."

Outreach to the Muslim world

Obama has always been a big believer in the power of speeches — given his oratorical gifts, it's not surprising that the former lawyer might feel he could convince people with sheer words alone.

During his campaign and the first year of his presidency, Obama thought he could present a new vision of America to his countrymen and the people of the world, says James Traub, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

In 2009, Obama delivered a speech in Cairo that was marketed as a revolutionary outreach to the Muslim world. He spoke of a "new beginning" between the U.S. and Muslims everywhere, one

based on “mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition.”

He also acknowledged, among other things, the U.S.’s role in overthrowing a democratically elected Iranian government during the Cold War.

The speech was widely hailed internationally, but offered little in concrete proposals. Many conservative critics back home dismissed it as part of Obama’s “apology tour,” which included other major speeches in which he denounced past U.S. actions.

Still, the Cairo speech, amongst others, convinced the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award Obama, only nine months into his presidency, its illustrious Peace Prize, for “his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and co-operation between peoples.”

Obama himself acknowledged the premature nature of the award and the “considerable controversy” surrounding it.

Part of what made it controversial was that at the time Obama accepted the award, he still had troops in Iraq, had just ordered a surge of 30,000 troops in Afghanistan and was becoming increasingly reliant on drone strikes to snuff out suspected terrorists.

“By the time he hit the podium at Oslo [in December 2009], he’d already launched more drone strikes than George W. Bush managed in his two full terms,” wrote Gene Healy, vice-president at the Cato Institute, in a recent column for Reason magazine.

Early on in his presidency, Obama embraced and expanded the use of drones as a way to ensure no U.S. soldier would be put at direct risk in some of the world’s most hostile regions.

The notion enjoyed bipartisan support at home, but it also sent a contradictory message.

Obama had repeatedly called for the closure of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, saying that terrorists used it as a propaganda tool for recruitment and that it was seen as a “stain on our broader record of upholding the highest standards of the rule of law.”

While condemning the indefinite detention of terror suspects, Obama, the former constitutional law professor, seemed to have no qualms about ordering the unilateral assassination of others with the push of a button.

Obama has said that drones are a clean and effective way of taking out leading figures in extremist groups and have spared the U.S. from deploying ground troops.

Experts, however, continue to debate whether such strikes work in the long run.

“I tend to think of it now more as a kind of irresistible temptation for the guy sitting in the White House,” Traub says. “Tempting to use it, and to exaggerate its effectiveness.”

Not only that, but drone strikes targeting Islamist extremists have only fuelled anti-American sentiment in places such as Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and beyond.

Traub believes Obama's Muslim outreach "mostly failed, and probably couldn't have succeeded in the first place, because speeches don't matter as much.

"The problems he was trying to deal with were far more intransigent than he thought."

Bin Laden and what came after

George W. Bush launched the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 to force the Taliban to hand over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the architect of the 9/11 attacks.

Obama has always supported the Afghan war, which he called a "war of necessity." In fact, part of his opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq was that it diverted resources from dismantling al-Qaeda and ultimately finding bin Laden.

In May 2011, Obama did something that had eluded the Bush administration since the beginning of the War on Terror – he got bin Laden.

Sending a special forces unit to a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in the dead of night to kill the al-Qaeda leader was a highly risky venture, and the exact details of the operation have been the subject of books, films and more than a few conspiracy theories.

But it paid off, and bin Laden's death marked the high point in the fight against al-Qaeda. Even Obama's staunchest critics put this achievement in the win column of his foreign policy.

Bin Laden's death struck a strategic blow to al-Qaeda, but the group has evolved and assumed other forms. According to Traub, al-Qaeda is not the kind of organization where "you could cut off the head and kill the animal."

Al-Qaeda may be a relatively depleted force in Pakistan, but it has grown strong in Yemen, as has its successor in Syria, the al-Nusra Front.

And then there's ISIS.

Obama initially dismissed the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as a junior varsity team compared to al-Qaeda, but by 2015, ISIS had demonstrated its influence and savagery, which included videotaped beheadings of prisoners, some of whom were U.S. citizens.

ISIS could no longer be ignored.

Obama certainly can't be blamed for the creation of ISIS. But his policy of retrenchment and insistence on pulling all troops out of Iraq by 2011 may have given the group the opening it needed.

In his 2014 book, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*, former defence secretary and CIA director Leon Panetta said he had warned Obama that withdrawing all forces "would endanger the fragile stability" of the region and that Iraq could become a new haven for terrorists.

Yes, the Iraqi government wanted the troops gone, but Panetta believes the president could have hashed out an agreement with Iraq to allow U.S. forces to stay past the December 2011 deadline.

Suffice to say, the emergence of ISIS hampered Obama's efforts to withdraw all U.S. troops from the region.

A U.S.-led coalition has recently brought ISIS to heel in Iraq, but at the cost of keeping 4,000 U.S. soldiers there. Meanwhile, another 8,400 remain in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban had forced the president to slow down the timetable of withdrawal.

These have been frustrating developments for Obama. While he can take credit for extricating the majority of U.S. soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, he ultimately couldn't finish the job.

And that's simply because these countries continue to be highly volatile.

"Obama hoped by finally cutting the cord of dependence, you would make these places stand up on their own two feet," Traub says.

"[That] was just wrong."

The Syria conflict, a problem from hell

If Iraq was Bush's foreign policy albatross, then Syria will likely be what most taints Obama's legacy.

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has killed more than half a million people and forced another five million to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries, Europe and beyond.

Obama's refusal to intervene in Syria was partly philosophical. He has always been skeptical of "wars of choice," where American interests aren't immediately at stake.

Yet he abandoned that principle when he agreed to join the military mission in Libya in 2011.

When the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring broke out in late 2010, the Obama administration initially took a wait-and-see attitude, trying to figure out how to respond.

One of the stickiest cases was Egypt, where protesters were demanding the ouster of strongman — and long-time U.S. ally — Hosni Mubarak. The U.S. seemed a bit baffled by it at first, but eventually, begrudgingly, encouraged Mubarak to step aside.

In nearby Libya, the government was responding to protests with brutal force. Obama was skeptical about pursuing action, but eventually agreed thanks to the strong advocacy of many of his advisers, including then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

And so in 2011, NATO launched an airstrike campaign on Libya to end government attacks against civilians and remove longstanding dictator Moammar Gadhafi. But after the coalition

achieved its aims, the country devolved into sectarian chaos and has since become a haven for Islamic extremists.

In an interview last year with Fox News, Obama admitted his worst mistake with Libya was “probably failing to plan for the day after.”

Having committed to leaving Iraq and Afghanistan and burned by the intervention in Libya, Obama was reluctant to entangle the U.S. in the Syria conflict.

He insisted that deploying a large number of U.S. troops would not change the equation on the ground. But his critics say that was a straw man argument – no one was ever suggesting such a course of action.

Supporters of limited intervention said the U.S. could crush the Syrian air force, set up a no-fly zone and provide support for moderate rebels.

Obama wouldn't budge, ignoring all calls for a “middle ground” solution.

But it was the “red line” threat that critics say ultimately showed his weakness.

In 2012, Obama warned that if Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad was caught using chemical weapons against his own people, the U.S. would respond. By the next year, there was sufficient evidence to suggest Assad had done precisely that.

In response, the U.S. prepared to launch air strikes against Syria In 2013. But Obama called them off at the last minute after Moscow said it had negotiated a deal for Syria to destroy most of the weapons.

Obama's retreat drew criticism from Republicans, Democrats and even senior members of his own staff.

According to journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, who covered Obama's foreign policy extensively, Vice-President Joe Biden repeatedly told the president that “big nations can't bluff” and that Hillary Clinton had said, “If you say you're going to strike, you have to strike. There's no choice.”

Former secretary of defence Robert Gates said not following through on the ultimatum was a “serious mistake.”

“The rest of the world must know that when the president of the United States draws a red line, that it is dangerous, if not fatal, to cross it.”

And yet, Assad had crossed it.

In a much-cited 2016 interview with Goldberg published in The Atlantic monthly, Obama defended his policy of non-intervention in Syria by saying the U.S. had “to be hard-headed at the same time as we're big-hearted.”

He went on to say that it's important to "recognize that there are going to be times where the best that we can do is shine a spotlight on something that's terrible but not believe that we can automatically solve it."

Obama told Goldberg he was "very proud" of his decision to avoid airstrikes, which broke with the "Washington playbook" on foreign policy.

Ultimately, Obama has said, he got the results he wanted: Assad gave up his chemical weapons.

True enough. But Obama's inaction also damaged U.S. credibility, says McGill University history professor Gil Troy, author of *Why Moderates Make the Best Presidents: George Washington to Barack Obama*.

"By not doing anything and appearing to be second string, he made America look like a second-rate power."

The Iran deal

Obama's reluctance to become more deeply involved in Syria may have been influenced by his ultimate foreign policy prize: reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, one of Syria's biggest allies.

Obama saw striking an agreement to neutralize Iran's nuclear weapon capabilities as key to stabilizing the region. And he theorized that if the U.S. went into Syria, Iran would not be willing to negotiate.

The overture to Iran, like the thawing of relations with Cuba that began in 2014, was part of Obama's pledge to engage long-time adversaries.

The difference was that the Iran deal had far greater geopolitical ramifications.

As part of the historic agreement reached in 2015, Iran agreed to curtail its nuclear program by reducing its enriched uranium stockpile for at least 10 years. In return, the U.S. and European Union lifted economic sanctions that had been crippling the fundamentalist regime.

Back home, support for Obama's deal was mostly split down partisan lines: Democrats were in favour, Republicans hated it. But it angered long-time allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose poisonous relationship with Obama is now in the open, has always viewed Iran as an existential threat to his country. In 2015, at the invitation of Republicans, Netanyahu made the extraordinary move of condemning the agreement in front of the U.S. House of Representatives.

While it has undoubtedly strained key relationships, the Iran deal is arguably Obama's signature foreign policy achievement.

Critics argue that the deal gives too many concessions to Iran and that the sanctions will be too difficult to snap back in place if the Islamic republic is seen as violating terms of the agreement.

Even supporters acknowledge it's difficult to determine its long-term success but say the hard-fought deal was worth pursuing.

“[Obama] found a pretty elegant solution with a diplomatic deal which at least delays the war drums for a while,” says Alex Ward, a member of the Atlantic Council think-tank and associate director at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security.

Ward says that in Obama's calculus, sacrificing a large role in Syria was a reasonable cost to get the deal.

“If it's [about choosing between] a nuclear issue and a humanitarian issue, in my mind, the nuclear issue outweighs it, because a nuclear race in the Middle East could be far more catastrophic in the long term than a humanitarian one now,” says Ward.

“It's not a great trade you have to make, it's an unsavoury one. But I think it's one worth making.”

The Russia 'reset'

Back in the early months of his presidency, in a speech in Prague's Hradcany Square, Obama expressed his commitment to seek “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

He pledged to reduce the U.S.'s stockpile and to ratify the treaty to ban the testing of nuclear weapons.

To do that, he would need a new nuclear arms deal with Russia. According to the Ploughshares Fund, a foundation seeking to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, Russia has approximately 7,300 warheads, an arsenal slightly larger than that of the U.S. (just under 7,000).

It was part of Obama's larger policy, shared by his predecessors, to “reset” U.S. relations with its one-time Cold War adversary — and, specifically, Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

Then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in March 2009 and publicly presented him with a red button. It was supposed to have the Russian word for reset — *perezagruzka* — on it, but as a foreshadow of misunderstandings to come, it was misspelled and said *peregruzka*, which means “overcharged.”

The principals laughed it off at the time, and initially at least, the two countries made headway. In 2010, Obama and then-Russian president Dmitry Medvedev signed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty to limit the number of nuclear warheads and increase on-site inspections.

Obama also sought to remove another source of tension – a planned missile defence shield located in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Russia has long felt that the U.S., and the West more generally, has tried to limit its power and felt threatened by having such military systems right at its front door.

At a global nuclear security summit in South Korea in 2012, Obama, in a private conversation with Medvedev that was picked up by a hot microphone, said he would have “more flexibility” on that issue after the U.S. election.

During the 2012 campaign, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney seized on the incident, declaring that Russia was America’s No. 1 geopolitical foe and that Obama’s comment was just another example of the U.S. administration bowing to the Kremlin.

Obama dismissed Romney’s concern with a quip during one of the debates: “The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back, because the Cold War’s been over for 20 years.”

Yet two years later, the Russians would annex the Crimea region of Ukraine — a U.S. NATO ally — and send forces to support separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Traub suggests there was little Obama could do, and believes Europe should shoulder more of the blame for not putting enough pressure on Russia to leave Ukraine.

But Robert Kaufman, a political scientist who specializes in U.S. foreign policy at Pepperdine University, said Obama’s whole approach to Russia and the Putin regime has been feckless.

Obama, like George W. Bush, ultimately underestimated Putin’s autocratic tendencies and determination to assert Russia’s influence in the geopolitical sphere.

Although the U.S. and the European Union imposed sanctions on Russia’s financial and energy sectors following the 2014 incursion into Ukraine, Kaufman says the measures haven’t done anything to contain Putin.

In fact, he seems emboldened to pursue even more ambitious goals — at U.S. expense.

For one thing, in the absence of U.S. involvement, Russia has become the dominant force in the Syrian conflict — first by providing military power to its Syrian ally and then by orchestrating, with Turkey, the recent ceasefires.

Then there are the hacking allegations that have lingered since the U.S. election, which brought Donald Trump to power.

Late in 2016, the Obama administration became preoccupied with the possibility that Russia had hacked into emails of the Democratic National Convention (and given them to WikiLeaks). A number of U.S. intelligence agencies have accused Moscow of trying to meddle in the U.S. election. For the most part, Trump shrugged them off and maintained that even if Russia was involved, he wanted to forge better ties with Putin.

In the final weeks of his presidency, with his own credibility at stake, Obama responded to the allegations by ordering the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats and the closing down of two Russian compounds in the U.S.

Putin laughed it off, dismissing the U.S. security accusations as baseless and restraining himself from retaliating.

It's been a humiliating drama for Obama. When he acknowledged Russia in his final news conference in December, it was with resentment.

He took pot shots at Republicans who downplayed Moscow's alleged meddling while also trash-talking Russia's ambitions to be a world power on a par with the U.S.

"They are a smaller country, they are a weaker country, their economy doesn't produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms," Obama said.

So much for resets.

One of Obama's benchmarks was to change America's image abroad, and in that, he had some success.

According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016, Obama's election led to a "significant improvement in America's global image." For example, U.S. favourability in France went from 39 per cent in 2007 to 73 per cent in 2015, and from 30 per cent to 50 per cent in Germany in the same time frame.

Yet Pew also found that residents of Muslim countries such as Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Turks and Lebanese — people Obama so desperately wanted to convince — continue to hold an unfavourable view of the U.S.

Obama's pursuit of endearing the U.S. to the world while pursuing a policy of retrenchment was ultimately a doomed formula.

"Even if there are countries who like America ... is the world in a better spot?" says Ward. "I think that's a hard one to argue."

The rise of Russia, the emergence of ISIS and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan are in many ways products of a foreign policy that put more emphasis on words than action.

"In short, he is the premature Nobel Peace Prize winner who is leaving the world a more dangerous place than when he found it," says Troy.

"[Obama] actually showed that when the U.S. retreats, evil festers in the vacuum left behind."