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## Did President Obama Become a Liberal Interventionist Because of Partisan Identity?

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| April 25, 2011

| [Justin Logan](#)<sup>[2]</sup>



There's a lot going on in [Ryan Lizza's \*New Yorker\* article about the Obama administration's foreign policy](#)<sup>[3]</sup>, but one thing that really stands out is how, right up front, the article reads as if Obama was an empty vessel on foreign policy until people told him what to think:

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 forgettable 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.

What's clear here is that Obama identified from early on as a Democrat. The question is: how did he get from Democratic partisanship to his foreign-policy ideology? The reason I was

intrigued by this passage is because of how similar it struck me to the story John Zaller tells in his seminal work *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* [4]. One crucial part of Zaller's book, which has been one of the more profound contributions to political science in the last few decades, is roughly summed up in his statement that

[W]hen elites uphold a clear picture of what should be done, the public tends to see events from that point of view, with the most politically attentive members of the public most likely to adopt the elite position. When elites divide, members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition, with the most politically attentive members of the public mirroring most sharply the ideological divisions among the elite.

The upshot here is that it is terribly difficult for each and every citizen to be a bona fide expert on nuclear deterrence, the Tenth Amendment, monetary policy, and the panoply of political, legal, and economic issues on which the government rules each day. So voters tend to develop opinions based in large part on the cues sent them by elite copartisans. People's substantive policy preferences are shaped less by careful consideration of the issue at hand, and more by cues sent them by elites regarding what to think.

An example of this on the GOP side would be when, during President Clinton's Kosovo War in the 1990s, Congressional Republicans sounded a lot like Code Pink sounds today [5]. Then, when their guy fired up the Iraq War in 2003, they turned round (with their partisan base marching in formation) and winged charges of appeasement, surrender, and all the rest to critics of that war, without batting an eye at the hypocrisy.

But getting back to Obama, he has tried at times to fancy himself a realist (at least in the Beltway argot), but has staffed his administration almost to a person with liberal interventionists and appears to have largely adopted liberal interventionist views.

To my mind it raises the question: to what extent did Obama become a liberal interventionist because the Democratic Party, with which he identified more, is comprised almost entirely of liberal interventionists, at least at the elite-policy level?

*Image by Carlos Latuff*

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[4] <http://www.amazon.com/Origins-Opinion-Cambridge-Political-Psychology/dp/0521407869>

[5] <http://www.slate.com/id/27730>