



How Washington changed Obama

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President Barack Obama's nominations of Leon Panetta as defense secretary and Gen. David Petraeus as director of central intelligence demonstrate that the president has abandoned his pledge to change U.S. foreign policy. In fact, these nominations show that Washington has changed Obama far more than he has changed Washington.

Obama long insisted that he wants to reorient America's focus — moving it away from nation-building projects in the Islamic world and toward Asia. He also insists he wants to trim military spending. But if Petraeus heads CIA and Panetta becomes defense secretary, it's unlikely either will happen.

In fact, these nominations, combined with other evidence, strongly suggest that Obama views foreign policy primarily as an instrument of domestic politics — an opportunity to give soaring speeches about the grand sweep of history and his view of America's role in it. As Zbigniew Brzezinski recently [lamented](#) to Ryan Lizza of *The New Yorker*, Obama “doesn't strategize. He sermonizes.” Obama has shown little willingness to shake up the established order in Washington and inject new ideas.

Before Obama named Panetta as CIA director, the former congressman from California had little experience on national security issues. This was part of a larger trend: Many of the president's important foreign policy aides have scant training in foreign policy.

For example, the president's national security adviser, Tom Donilon, had been a Beltway lawyer, lobbyist and executive at Fannie Mae. The lead author of the president's National Security Strategy, Ben Rhodes, has a background in fiction and poetry, putting aside work on his first novel (“The Oasis of Love”) to join the administration's speech-writing team, from which he moved over to the National Security Council.

To be fair to the foreign policy neophytes, the bona fide experts haven't been much better. Former State Department Director of Policy Planning Anne-Marie Slaughter lamented in her departure speech that in U.S. foreign policy, men generally do the “high politics” of diplomacy and war, while women work on “low politics” like economic development and human rights. Slaughter also noted that female foreign policymakers often feel the need to “out-tough the tough guys.” Once out of government, Slaughter was at the forefront of the crowd urging the president to bomb Libya.

Beyond his relative inexperience in national security issues, Panetta is a dubious choice to fulfill Obama's recent pledge to trim military spending. Any secretary charged with realizing that pledge would need extraordinary credibility with Capitol Hill Republicans, many of whom are determined to continue raining money on the Pentagon regardless of the nation's parlous fiscal position. Despite having once been a Republican, Panetta ran for Congress as Democrat and has served prominently in Democratic administrations. He is unlikely to craft the pragmatic consensus needed to give the Pentagon a haircut.

Petraeus's nomination poses a different problem. He has spent the past decade focused

on what we used to call — at the behest of his commanders in chief — the “global war on terrorism.” But is U.S. nation-building in the Muslim world the most important national security and intelligence problem we face today?

Wouldn't we be better served by having someone at the CIA with a background in East Asia? Or thinking about potential future problems — issues such as cyberwar? Doesn't sending the world's leading GWOT veteran to run the CIA signal that Obama is renegeing on his pledge to refocus American policy?

The U.S. desperately needs to change its focus. We account for roughly half the world's military spending, yet we feel terribly insecure. We infantilize our allies so that they won't pay to defend themselves and instead allow us to do it for them. We stumble into small- and medium-sized foreign quagmires the way many people eat breakfast — frequently and without much thought.

Since the end of the Cold War, both Republicans and Democrats have made U.S. foreign policy into a slapdash, pinch-of-this, handful-of-that stew — comprising crusading ideology, protests of being above ideology, national narcissism, bureaucratic infighting, domestic politics and groupthink. With these forces powerfully influencing foreign policy, it's a miracle things haven't gone worse.

For his part, Obama, who seems to think that every choice is false, believes his foreign policy approach is “anti-ideological” and that it defies “traditional categories and ideologies.” Unnamed aides recently [told The New Yorker](#) that the president is “an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works.”

The trouble is that there is no way to be “non-ideological” in foreign policy, and few presidents would admit they are more interested in ideology than in what actually works. Leaders have to determine which things are important and which are unimportant; why the important ones are important; and what to do about the important ones. There's no way to answer those questions without theory. If the president is lying about his belief that he is “anti-ideological” for political reasons, that's fine. If he actually believes it, that's scary.

In a better world, presidents would enter office having clearly explained their foreign policy worldviews and surrounding themselves with a group of people holding impressive résumés in international politics. But of course, we don't live in that better world. The U.S. is so secure that foreign policymakers can do lots of dumb things without even getting voters to care. In the words of the great folk singer Roger Alan Wade: “If you're gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough.”

Thank goodness we're tough.

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