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Reassessing Obama's Legacy of Restraint

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The first draft of history has been kind to President Barack Obama's foreign policy legacy. A year ago, Gideon Rose of *Foreign Affairs* wrote that Obama "will likely pass on to his successor an overall foreign policy agenda and national power position in better shape than when he entered office." He praised Obama for "pulling back from misguided adventures...in the global periphery." Derek Chollet, who served in the Obama administration for six years, went further. He praised Obama for seeking to change not just a few major policies, but the entire worldview of the foreign policy establishment:

For Obama, the mentality that led to Iraq was the most prominent example of a systemic breakdown—the result of a distinct mindset that had dominated U.S. foreign policy for too long.

In place of the black-and-white establishment view that the United States must always *do something*, Obama played a "long game" in which patience, balance, restraint, and pragmatism counted as much as the establishment's fetishes, strength and credibility.

Indeed, this seems to be Obama's own view of his legacy. Jeffrey Goldberg, who spoke with Obama extensively about his foreign policy legacy for his seminal article, "The Obama Doctrine," wrote,

The president believes that Churchillian rhetoric and, more to the point, Churchillian habits of thought, helped bring his predecessor, George W. Bush, to ruinous war in Iraq.

During the crisis over Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, Obama told his staff he was "tired of watching Washington unthinkingly drift toward war in Muslim countries." Obama wanted liberation from the Washington "playbook" that dictated intervention, a playbook he viewed as sometimes a "trap that can lead to bad decisions." Obama interprets his decision not to undertake military action in Syria as illustrative of his overall approach to foreign policy. "I'm very proud of this moment," Goldberg quotes him as saying.

The overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom and the machinery of our national-security apparatus had gone fairly far [towards intervention]... And the fact that I was able to pull back

from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America's interest... was as tough a decision as I've made—and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make.

The premise of these assessments of Obama's foreign policy legacy is that there is something identifiable as the foreign policy "establishment" that has a consensus worldview; that the establishment consensus led to foolish adventurism and needless conflicts in strategically unimportant regions; and that the solution, therefore, was to challenge establishment interventionism and exercise more restraint. Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor for strategic communications, complained that U.S. foreign policy was dominated by groupthink — or, as he called it, the "Blob" — from which Obama struggled hard to break free. *A New York Times Magazine* [profile](#) quotes Rhodes on this point: "The reason the president has bucked a lot of establishment thinking is because he does not agree with establishment thinking."

But what if these premises are wrong? What if Obama, Rhodes and their supporters wove a misleading narrative about what ailed U.S. foreign policy? Obama's foreign policy worldview came from his self-conscious effort to learn the lessons of history — specifically, the lessons of the George W. Bush administration — which no one will fault. As anyone who has ever taken a class in history or political science knows, Obama knew George Santayana's [famous aphorism](#) that "those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." But learning the lessons of history can be difficult, even deceptive. Obama does not seem to have known Robert Jervis' important [riposte](#) to Santayana that "those who remember the past are condemned to make the opposite mistake."

Obama made the opposite mistake. In his eagerness to avoid making Bush's mistakes, he made a whole new set of mistakes. He over-interpreted the recent past, fabricating the myth about a hyper-interventionist establishment. As a result, he overreacted to the situation he inherited in 2009 and, crucially, never adjusted during his eight years in office. In this sense and others, he contrasts starkly with Bush, who made major changes in his second term. The result is that Obama retrenched when he should have engaged. He oversaw the collapse of order across the Middle East and the resurgence of great power rivalry in Europe while mismanaging two wars and reducing America's military posture abroad to its smallest footprint since World War II. Despite the paeans of Obama's admirers, this is not a foreign policy legacy future presidents will want to emulate.

Afghanistan

The myth of a foreign policy establishment addicted to strategically questionable interventions took shape in reaction to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Part of the myth is that Obama recognized a systemic flaw in the principle of interventionism and came into office intent on ending America's military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Goldberg wrongly claims, "Obama entered the White House bent on getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan." And he quotes Rhodes to the same effect:

[Obama] was particularly mindful of promising victory in conflicts he believed to be unwinnable. "If you were to say, for instance, that we're going to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban

and build a prosperous democracy instead, the president is aware that someone, seven years later, is going to hold you to that promise,” Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national-security adviser, and his foreign-policy amanuensis, told me not long ago.

In fact, Obama did almost exactly that: he campaigned on a pledge to escalate and win the war in Afghanistan — still considered the “good war” — not get out of it. He wrote in 2007, “We must refocus our efforts on Afghanistan and Pakistan—the central front in our war against al Qaeda—so that we are confronting terrorists where their roots run deepest.” He said on the campaign trail in 2008, “As President, I will make the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be. This is a war that we have to win.” He promised three additional brigades of combat troops and an additional \$1 billion in civilian assistance every year. Obama explicitly argued that the war in Afghanistan was strategically vital and that, as president, he would win it. His administration deepened its engagement in Afghanistan and escalated the war there — not because Washington think tanks or the military-industrial complex manipulated Obama, but because then-Sen. Obama explicitly campaigned on a promise to do so.

From its inception, the war in Afghanistan was never the result of foreign policy analysts’ habit of invading countries. It was, rather, a direct response to al-Qaeda’s 2001 attack on the United States. There were zero foreign policy analysts advocating for an invasion of Afghanistan before the terrorist attacks of 2001. Afterward, there were virtually none counseling restraint. Essentially every scholar, policymaker or voter supported the war at its outset. If that constitutes an “establishment,” Obama was part of it and no one questioned the strategic importance of military intervention there.

If the war in Afghanistan is evidence of an unthinking establishment, of hyper-interventionism or of America’s strategic myopia, then it is evidence of the Obama administration’s own complicity in those faults. But it strains credulity to interpret the war in Afghanistan that way. A far simpler explanation is that Obama saw the wisdom of the bipartisan consensus and chose to follow through on his own campaign promises. Four successive White House strategy reviews between 2006 and 2009, including two under Bush and two under Obama, all concluded the war in Afghanistan was important to American security and required greater resources, attention and coordination.

Unfortunately, once in office, Obama’s instincts for restraint took over and undermined his own war. Despite his ambitious campaign promises and his initial steps to escalate the war, he set a publicly-announced deadline to withdraw U.S. troops on a fixed timetable – his biggest strategic misstep and the most consequential decision of the war. The withdrawal (which the strategy reviews had not recommended) was so clearly mistaken that Obama eventually reversed himself at the end of his term in office. Obama’s self-narrative — that by ignoring the establishment and exercising restraint he refocused American policy on core interests — is exactly wrong. The only aspect of his Afghan policy to run counter to the establishment wisdom is precisely the part that did the most to damage America’s war aims and undid the gains of a decade of fighting.

Obama’s restraint cost the United States dearly. After having drawn down the U.S. military presence to fewer than 10,000 troops by the end of 2016, the Obama administration’s legacy in South Asia is that the Taliban have regained the initiative. Afghan and allied forces made some

progress during the surge of U.S. troops from 2010 to 2012. But according to a wide array of sources, including military and government agencies, think tanks and international watchdog groups, virtually every trend reversed direction as international military forces began to withdraw. In 2015, the Taliban briefly seized control of Konduz, Afghanistan's fifth-largest city. The United Nations noted a rise in the number of security incidents in 2016. In the final month of the Obama administration's term in office, a *New York Times* headline warned that the "Afghan Security Crisis Sets Stage for Terrorists' Resurgence." The Afghan government is teetering on the brink of a perennial political crisis and still is paralyzed by endemic institutional weakness and corruption. The United States' goal of denying safe haven to al-Qaeda and its affiliates and allies in the region is no closer to being achieved than it was eight years ago.

Iraq and Syria

If the war in Afghanistan fails to support the myth of a hyper-interventionist establishment and Obama's wise restraint, the debate over the war in Iraq casts doubt on the idea of an establishment at all. There was little consensus as to whether or not to go to war throughout 2002 and early 2003. The United States witnessed a vibrant 14-month debate on the merits of invading Iraq — a debate that saw division among foreign policy experts across the spectrum. Brent Scowcroft, for example, who served as national security advisor to George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford, opposed the war, as did former CIA Director Stansfield Turner and former NSA Director William Odom. Several prominent think tank leaders expressed opposition, including Gene Healy and Bill Niskanen of the Cato Institute, Jessica Matthews of the Carnegie Endowment, and Morton Halperin of the Council on Foreign Relations. One-third of the House of Representatives and almost a quarter of Senators opposed the war, including Senators Ted Kennedy, Robert Byrd and Russ Feingold. Public opinion before the war was narrowly split, though it later surged as the war began. It is true that weight of opinion among foreign policy experts — a loose and ill-defined category — seemed to favor the war in 2002 and early 2003, but it was far from unanimous or uncritical. There was no unthinking Washington establishment blindly dragging the United States to war.

An establishment view did coalesce from 2003 through 2006: that Bush mismanaged the war, bungled the occupation and should withdraw rather than double down — a view Obama shared. Most foreign policy leaders were firmly united in opposition to the surge of troops and the adoption of a counterinsurgency strategy in 2006 and 2007; the impetus for which came from a small group of scholars and policymakers on the National Security Council staff, at the American Enterprise Institute, a few voices in the military, and the president himself. The Iraq Study Group, comprised of staunchly establishment figures like former Secretary of Defense William Perry and future Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, did not endorse the surge and counterinsurgency strategy. Bush had to fire his own secretary of defense, appoint a new commanding general, persuade the reluctant Joint Chiefs of Staff, and run counter to overwhelming opposition from the public and Congress — including from Obama — to implement the surge. Foreign policy leaders were not mindlessly dragging Bush deeper into Iraq. They were desperately trying to drag him out. Bush's surge decision — not Obama's foreign policy — is the clearest example of a president fighting the foreign policy establishment, and he did it to exercise greater American leadership, not restraint.

When Obama took command of the Iraq War in 2009, he did not buck the foreign policy establishment. He followed it right out of Iraq, to the detriment of American security and regional order. The Iraq Study Group had proposed as its chief recommendation “a change in the primary mission of U.S. forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly.” In 2007 the Democrat-controlled U.S. House passed a spending bill that would have required a withdrawal by the end of 2008. In 2009 Bennett Ramberg cautioned in *Foreign Affairs* that the lessons of Vietnam were that “getting out sooner rather than later is the United States’ best chance to protect its interests.” Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations argued in July 2011 for “ending the U.S. military presence, reducing the operation’s financial burden on U.S. taxpayers, and providing assistance to Iraq so that it can defend its borders.” Michael Hanna of the Century Foundation warned that failure to withdraw would “undercut the Iraqi government and risk spurring renewed violence,” whereas “the very act of withdrawal...will allow the United States to become a strategic partner for the emerging Iraqi state.” In late 2011, 75 percent of Americans supported withdrawal, according to Gallup.

A small minority cautioned Iraq was not ready for self-sufficiency and warned of dire consequences including renewed sectarian killing, a resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and similar jihadist groups, and spillover effects across the region. Meghan O’Sullivan, deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan in the Bush administration, warned in 2011 that leaving Iraq “increases the risks of failure in Iraq by eliminating the psychological backstop to a still delicate political system and by kicking open the door more widely to foreign interference.” Bush himself warned in March 2007 that “a contagion of violence could spill out across the country. In time, this violence could engulf the region. The terrorists could emerge from the chaos with a safe haven in Iraq...” At another event in July he said an early withdrawal “would mean surrendering the future of Iraq to al-Qaida. It’d mean that we’d be risking mass killings on a horrific scale....it’d mean that we be increasing the probability that American troops would have to return at some later date to confront an enemy that is even more dangerous.” But Bush’s approval rating was near 30 percent, few scholars or policymakers publicly stood with him and the American people elected Obama on a platform of ending the war and withdrawing U.S. troops.

If Obama’s claim that he worked against the tide of conventional wisdom were correct, he would have heeded the few voices who made the unpopular argument that the United States should have stayed in Iraq. But in this case, Obama’s instincts for restraint closely tracked the arguments of foreign policy leaders and the American people. Obama followed his own campaign promise and the course of least political resistance, and American troops left Iraq at the end of 2011. Without international accountability the Iraqi government degenerated into a thuggish Shia autocracy and sectarian killing revived. Without American military assistance, the Iraqi Army lost ground to insurgents, criminals and terrorists. Jihadists, now under the banner of the Islamic State, made rapid gains, seizing Fallujah and Ramadi in early 2014, followed by its proclamation of a caliphate and conquest of Mosul in June. Genocidal violence against Christians, Yazidi, Kurds, and Shia followed in its wake. An enduring U.S. presence in Iraq would not have solved all of Iraq’s problems but it could have blunted the mass atrocities and collapse of order of the past few years. The catastrophe in Iraq was not due to a Washington elite

blinded by an ideology of hyper-interventionism, but one blinded by war fatigue and political calculation.

Obama and his team have worked hard to refute this narrative. The former president offered his rebuttal as the centerpiece of his foreign policy valedictory in December:

There's been a debate about ISIL that's focused on whether a continued U.S. troop presence in Iraq back in 2011 could have stopped the threat of ISIL from growing.

He claimed it was impossible not to withdrawal from Iraq: "And as a practical matter, this was not an option. By 2011, Iraqis wanted our military presence to end, and they were unwilling to sign a new Status of Forces Agreement."

This is simply false. The Obama administration worked to negotiate some sort of stay-behind force of perhaps 10,000 troops in Iraq after 2011. There were active negotiations throughout 2011 to extend the Status of Forces Agreement. But the Obama administration was unwilling to spend political capital on an unpopular deployment that the president had campaigned against — so when negotiations got difficult, he walked away.

Yet in Obama's narrative, the withdrawal didn't hurt Iraq or contribute to the collapse of order and the rise of ISIL over the next few years. "Maintaining American troops in Iraq at the time [2011] could not have reversed the forces that contributed to ISIL's rise," Obama said. But if U.S. troops could not have done anything in 2011, it is unclear why Obama ordered U.S. troops back to Iraq to fight ISIL in 2014. Had Obama been right that U.S. troops had no effect on the security situation in Iraq in 2011 — a dubious claim — it's unlikely a smaller deployment would have had any greater impact in much worse conditions in 2014. And if the Obama administration believed the 2014 deployment was an effective use of force, it casts doubt on the wisdom of the 2011 withdrawal.

Nonetheless, the myth of Washington's self-destructive interventionism had begun to take root and played directly into Obama's decisions regarding Syria, which in 2011 had just begun its descent into civil war and chaos. A few voices, including Sen. John McCain, did call for early intervention but there was no consensus about whether or what kind of intervention the United States might undertake. Obama himself called for Assad to step down in August of 2011 even as he resisted calls to intervene militarily. A year later he said that Assad's use of chemical weapons would be a "red line." In 2013, evidence emerged that Assad had done just that. Obama's cabinet and military planners began preparing options for a military response.

It was in this context that Obama complained to his staff about being "tired of watching Washington unthinkingly drift toward war in Muslim countries," a complaint he used to justify his refusal to act. It is a striking complaint because of how groundless and ahistorical it is. The United States did not drift toward war in Afghanistan in 2001. It responded to a direct attack. It did not drift toward escalation in Afghanistan in 2009. It was the result of considered, bipartisan strategy reviews that Obama endorsed. It did not drift unthinkingly toward war in Iraq in 2003. The debates were divisive and sharp. If anything, the country was unthinkingly drifting toward withdrawal from Iraq in 2006 and it was only Bush's decision to fight that drift that led to the

surge and temporary turn-around in the security situation — which Obama promptly undermined by withdrawing U.S. troops before Iraqi forces were prepared to undertake independent operations.

In one case Obama's complaint about a drift to war in Muslim countries may be apt: his own intervention in Libya in 2011. But the aspect of the Libyan intervention that seems most unthinking in retrospect is the administration's lack of forethought about replacing the Qaddafi regime and investing in post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization — exactly the same error the Bush administration made in Iraq. If Obama wanted to learn from Bush's mistakes, Libya was the perfect occasion to do so. Instead, Obama's mythologizing of the Bush legacy looks less like learning from history and more like a self-serving justification for his inaction in Syria, and an attempt to shift blame for the consequences of his withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Consequences of a Grand Strategy of Restraint

Obama's instinct for restraint and its damaging consequences for American security was evident beyond the Middle East and South Asia. Obama's military pullback, for example, has gone further than his withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan: There are some 50,000 fewer U.S. troops stationed abroad than there were in September 2001 before Bush's wars. The current global defense posture — about 200,000 troops mostly in Europe and East Asia — is the smallest since World War II. The decline in America's hard power abroad deprives the United States of bargaining leverage against Russia's aggression in Europe and China's coercive diplomacy in the East and South China Seas. In lieu of U.S. military deployments, arms sales have become a much larger part of U.S. foreign policy. Total sales agreements more than doubled from an average of about \$16 billion per year during the Bush administration to nearly \$36 billion per year under Obama. In the past the United States used forward-deployed troops to discourage the rest of the world from arming against each other. Now Obama has armed the world to replace departing U.S. troops.

In addition, Obama has done remarkably little to advance liberal ideals around the world and, in fact, presided over a global retreat of democracy. Like all presidents he praised democracy and human rights — notably in his speeches in Cairo in 2009 and during the Arab Spring in May 2011. But his deeds spoke louder. His administration did little to discourage coups against democratically elected governments in Mali in 2012, Egypt in 2013 or Thailand in 2014; or to address the slow erosion of democracy in Turkey and the Philippines; or to address the troubling rise of extremist political movements in Austria, Greece and Hungary. He did little to help Ukraine defend itself from Russia, preferring sanctions over weapons transfers or other forms of security assistance. When Iranians took to the streets in their Green Revolution in 2009 and when the Arab Spring broke out in 2011, the United States largely stood by and watched events rather than shape them. U.S. foreign assistance — a crucial tool for shaping events, supporting democratic movements and investing in allies around the world — declined from \$47.6 billion in 2011 to \$36.6 billion in 2016. The decline was not wholly due to the drawdown in military assistance to Iraq and Afghanistan: Democracy assistance declined globally from \$3.5 billion in 2010 to a low of \$1.2 billion in 2016.

Obama's approach to counterterrorism was also problematic. Bush argued that only a holistic approach that addressed underlying political and economic conditions would defeat jihadist terrorism. That is why he was drawn to large and costly counterinsurgency and democratization campaigns. Obama, in reaction to Bush, gravitated toward a pared-down counterterrorism strategy shorn of broader ambitions to remake the societies in which jihadism grew. Even as Obama withdrew large deployments of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and reduced U.S. foreign aid and democracy assistance abroad, he also ramped up and expanded the scope of the alleged drone program to spy on and strike individual terrorist targets around the world, according to the New America Foundation.

While superficially appealing for its apparent realism and humility, the net effect of Obama's counterterrorism strategy was to abandon any effort to achieve lasting peace and resign the world to a state of endless war. Under Obama the United States has sustained a worldwide assassination campaign against anyone it unilaterally deems to be a terrorist, anywhere in the world, indefinitely. Even setting aside the troubling moral considerations of this policy, the apparent economy of lean counterterrorism operations is undone when they continue into their third or fourth decade. And the United States is unlikely to burnish its reputation abroad when drone strikes are the most visible aspect of its foreign policy.

Obama's policy has simply failed. According to a RAND Corporation report, the number of jihadist groups increased by 58 percent since 2010, the number of fighters more than doubled in the same time frame, and attacks increased nearly tenfold since 2008. By every measure jihadist groups are more popular, more widespread and more powerful now than in 2009. Libya is exhibit A of Obama's efforts at a low-cost, light-footprint intervention.

Obama has occasionally exercised greater leadership on the world stage. The much-vaunted "pivot" to Asia is sound in concept. The U.S. Navy has undertaken more aggressive presence patrols in the South China Sea and joint training exercises with India and Japan. The Paris Agreement on climate change would not have happened without Obama's attention. Yet some of Obama's efforts at leadership have been poorly implemented or counterproductive. His outreach to Cuba had some logic to it, but he could have driven a better bargain by waiting for the drop in oil prices to undermine the ability of Cuba's patron, Venezuela, to prop up the Castro dictatorship. And the Iran nuclear deal lacks adequate inspections and verification measures — in retrospect, the deal looks less like an effective arms control treaty and more like the codification of Iran's regional hegemony in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

Obama was keen to avoid Bush's mistakes. He captured his intent with a pithy slogan: "Don't do stupid stuff," clearly implying that Bush's foreign policy was the stupid stuff he intended to avoid. For Rhodes, his foreign policy speechwriter, "Iraq is his one-word answer to any and all criticism." If Obama's foreign policy is judged by whether or not he invaded Iraq, history will vindicate him — partially. Obama was, of course, compelled to redeploy several thousand troops to Iraq in 2014 to stem the chaos there, as Bush had predicted seven years previously. But it seems insufficient to judge a president's foreign policy by whether or not he repeated the biggest mistake of his predecessor. As Secretary Hillary Clinton said, "Great nations need organizing principles, and 'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle." Similarly, "Don't invade Iraq," isn't a sufficient basis for judging presidential performance. Obama may have realized that

late in his administration. Obama told Goldberg that he “has come to learn...that very little is accomplished in international affairs without U.S. leadership.” Some scholars and policymakers understood as much in 2008.