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Obama Speech Connects to the Founders' Foreign Policy

By [Christopher Preble](#)

Predictably, the reaction to President Obama's Cairo speech has diverged along partisan lines. Conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt declared that the speech conveyed "extraordinary weakness on the part of the United States." "It will indeed be a famous speech," Hewitt predicted, "for all the wrong reasons." GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney preemptively labeled it part of an "apology" tour. Those on the left came to different conclusions. "Mission accomplished," gushed liberal blogger M.J. Rosenberg.

One group of Americans, however, has remained silent. They have not appeared on radio or television. They have no blogs. They would have been incapable of operating a typewriter, let alone a personal computer. Nonetheless, the nation's Founders would approve of key elements of Obama's speech.

How do I know? While they can't Tweet from the grave, their words and writings span the generations, and President Obama wisely connected U.S. policy in the 21st century to the principles that formed the Republic.

In his Cairo speech, Obama reminded his audience - or perhaps taught them for the very first time - that the United States was not now, nor ever has been, at war with Islam, or with any other religion. He quoted John Adams, who saw no reason why the United States could not enjoy good relations with Morocco, the first country to recognize the United States. When signing the Treaty of Tripoli, Adams wrote, "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims."

President George Washington affirmed the nation's respect for all religions in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island. Washington rejected the notion that the new government "tolerated" particular religions, because that implied that it was through "the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." On the contrary, Washington explained, "the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens."

In fairness, quotes can be taken out of context to serve many ends, good or ill. Fifteen minutes on Google could reveal comments by the Founders, including Washington and Adams, that would land a modern politician in a mandatory diversity training seminar. So much for the principle of racial equality in 18th century America, say the skeptics.

Still, for all their faults, the Founders views on foreign policy are worth recalling. They believed that the new nation should advance human rights and the cause of liberty by its example, not by force. They believed that military force was sometimes required, as does Obama today, for example, when he pledged to "relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security." By the same token, the Founders realized that war was one of the primary vehicles whereby governments infringed upon individual liberty, and they sought ways to limit the government's propensity to wage war, particularly by giving the power to declare and fund wars to Congress.

Some of our recent leaders seem to have forgotten that. Others, to the extent that they are aware of these Constitutional limits, have sought to remove them. They have taken their cues from a group of thinkers who scorned John Quincy Adams's admonition that America ought not go "abroad in search of monsters to destroy," and the Founders' broader vision of "sitting atop a hill and leading by example" as, in the words of William Kristol and Robert Kagan, synonymous with "cowardice and dishonor."

President Obama obviously disagrees. In Cairo he cast his lot with the earlier generation, quoting Thomas Jefferson who said "I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be." The speech signals the president's belief that we would be richer, freer, and safer if we adhered more closely to the wise standard that our Founders set for us. For that, Americans and non-Americans alike should be pleased.

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