



# How Obama Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Imperial Presidency

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[Ross Douthat](#) reflects on Barack Obama's transition from a critic of the imperial presidency to an imperial president.

*LET me be clear, as he likes to say: I believe that President Obama was entirely sincere when he ran for president as a fierce critic of the imperial executive. I believe that he was in earnest when he told supporters in 2008 that America's "[biggest problems](#)" involved "George Bush trying to bring more and more power into the executive branch and not go through Congress at all." I believe he meant it when he cast himself as a principled civil libertarian, when he pledged to [defer to Congress](#) on war powers, when he promised to abjure privileges Bush had claimed.*

*I also believe he was sincere when he told audiences, [again and again](#) across his presidency, that a sweeping unilateral move like the one just made on immigration would betray the norms of constitutional government.*

*So how did we get from there to here? How did the man who was supposed to [tame the imperial presidency](#) become, in certain ways, more imperial than his predecessor?*

The short answer, of course, is that he *became president*. In addition to the world simply looking different when you're its ostensible leader, the temptations of pushing the envelope to do things you genuinely believe good for the country are immense. And so he did.

*The scope of Obama's moves can be debated, but that basic imperial reality is clear. Even as he has maintained much of the Bush-era national security architecture, this president has been more willing to launch military operations without congressional approval; more willing to trade in assassination and deal death even to American citizens; and more aggressive in his war on leakers, whistle-blowers and [journalists](#).*

*At the same time, he has been much more aggressive than Bush in his use of executive power to pursue major [domestic policy goals](#) — on education, climate change, health care and now most sweepingly on immigration.*

During this week's debate on the executive order to circumvent an obstreperous Congress on immigration reform, some dismissive defenders noted that many of Obama's critics cheered his

predecessor's circumventions of the law on torture and domestic surveillance. While I was not among their number on either count, the difference is that presidents have long taken liberties on war powers and national security policy—areas where the executive is naturally dominant. Domestic policy is different, since that's Congress' bailiwick. Douthat's explanation is nuanced and reasonable:

*First, public expectations. Across the last century, the presidency's powers have increased in a symbiosis with changing public expectations about the office. Because Congress is unsexy, frustrating and hard to follow, mass democracy seems to demand a single iconic figure into whom desires and aspirations and hatreds can be poured. And so the modern president, the Cato Institute's [Gene Healy has written](#), is increasingly seen as “a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns and spiritual malaise.”*

*And pressure on this talisman to act, even in violation of laws or norms or Burkean traditions, is ever increasing and intense. When presidents aren't seen as “doing something,” they're castigated as lame ducks; when they take unilateral action, as we've seen in the last week of media coverage, they suddenly seem to get their groove back. And that's something that even a principled critic of executive power can find ever harder to pass up.*

This is easily the most defensible of the rationales offered. The pressure to “do something” is indeed immense and the last two decades of Congressional obstructionism—which the current crop of Republicans have taken to a low art form—frustrates that enormously. Relatedly:

Second, congressional abdication. This is the point that liberals raise, and plausibly, in President Obama's defense: It isn't just that he's been dealing with an opposition party that's swung to the right; it's that this opposition doesn't know its own mind, collectively or sometimes even individually, and so has trouble bargaining or legislating effectively.

*This reality has made it harder to cut major bipartisan deals; it's made it harder to solve problems that crop up within existing law; it's made it harder for the president to count votes on foreign policy. All of which creates more incentives for presidential unilateralism: In some cases, it seems required to keep the wheels turning; in others, it can be justified as the only way to get the Big Things done.*

In a sense, that's an extension of the first. But, as I've noted in several pieces this week, one I'm not sympathetic to. Yes, the Republicans have played hard ball to the extreme and that incentivizes the Democrats to do the same. But it doesn't legitimate flipping the Constitution on its head.

*Which bring us to the third factor in the president's transformation: his own ambitions. While running for president, Obama famously praised Ronald Reagan for changing “[the trajectory of America](#)” in a way that Bill Clinton's triangulation did not. And it's his self-image as the liberal Reagan, I suspect, that's made it psychologically impossible for this president to accept the limits that his two predecessors eventually accepted on their own policy-making ability.*

*That transformative self-image has shaped his presidency from the beginning: Obama never really looked for domestic issues where he might be willing to do a version of something the other party wanted — as Bush did with education spending and Medicare Part D, and Clinton did with welfare reform. (He's had a self-admiring willingness to incorporate conservative ideas into essentially liberal proposals, but that's not really the same thing.)*

*But the liberal Reagan idea has shaped his choices more as it's become clear that certain major liberal priorities — a big climate-change bill, a comprehensive amnesty — are as out of legislative reach as health care reform proved for Clinton and Social Security reform for Bush. Confronted with those realities, Clinton pivoted and Bush basically gave up. But Obama can't accept either option, because both seem like betrayals of his promise, his destiny, his image of himself.*

The country is simply more polarized than it was during the Reagan years. I was pretty rough during the Clinton and Bush years, too, but in a different way. But Obama was hamstrung from the beginning by both a poisonous political climate and the fiscal crisis. To be sure, Franklin Roosevelt transformed the country as no other president before or since during the Great Depression. But these are different times, indeed.

Douthat mars a really thoughtful piece just a bit by too cutesy a close:

*And so he has chosen to betray himself in a different way, by becoming the very thing that he once campaigned against: an elected Caesar, a Cheney for liberalism, a president unbound.*

Obama has pushed the envelope. He's hardly "unbound," however, much less an "elected Caesar." That Congress refuses to rein him in is to their discredit; but it's pretty much been the norm for six decades. And I'm not sure what "a Cheney for liberalism" even means, especially in the context of a twice-elected president.