

*Tereni Sivi*

**The Presidency of  
Barack Obama  
A First Historical  
Assessment**

Edited by Julian E. Zelizer

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*To Harav Hanoch and Bayshe Zelizer, my great-grandparents,  
who arrived on these shores in the early twentieth century and  
embodied the promise of our immigrant nation*

# 13

## Liberal Internationalism, Law, and the First African American President

*Jeremi Suri*

The election of the nation's first African American president was possible, in part, because of a failed war in Iraq. Barack Obama promised change in the way the country conducted itself at home and abroad. Speaking to a crowd of 200,000 enthusiastic German citizens in Berlin, he announced that his presidency would “build new bridges across the globe as strong as the one that bound us across the Atlantic. Now is the time to join together, through constant cooperation, strong institutions, shared sacrifice, and a global commitment to progress, to meet the challenges of the 21st century.”<sup>1</sup>

Obama offered a liberal internationalist vision—emphasizing multilateralism, negotiation, and disarmament—after eight years of aggressive neo-conservative militarism under President George W. Bush. He affirmed the standard defense of American power: “The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.” Yet, he emphasized, “adhering to standards, international standards, strengthens those who do, and isolates and weakens those who don’t.” The latter claim explained his early opposition to the Iraq war, the use of torture, and the incarceration of accused terrorists at Guantánamo Bay without due process. Obama aimed to

fuse American power with collective security efforts, not unilateral efforts, and he sought to expand the reach of international law, not national vigilante efforts at "ending tyranny" in faraway lands.<sup>2</sup>

Although Obama flagrantly affirmed American exceptionalism and the indispensable role of the United States around the globe, he rejected the inherited justifications for continuous war against threatening powers and violent ideologies. He argued for engagement, diplomacy, and limited use of force to build peace and law in troubled areas. He spoke optimistically of persuading and converting adversaries, rather than trying to eliminate them. "The promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone. At times, it must be coupled with painstaking diplomacy. I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach—condemnation without discussion—can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door."<sup>3</sup>

Continuous war closed opportunities for engagement that Obama wanted to open as part of an evolving liberal world order: "Agreements among nations. Strong institutions. Support for human rights. Investments in development. All these are vital ingredients." President Obama's menu of preferred policies emphasized cooperation, even with adversaries, over coercion. After the near global opposition to America's invasion of Iraq, Obama sought to make the United States once again a popular world leader.<sup>4</sup>

Referring to the expansive Global War on Terror, begun by his predecessor, the president explained: "This war, like all wars, must end. That's what history advises. That's what our democracy demands." Obama defined his liberal internationalism in stark contrast to Bush's aggressive unilateralism. And this contrast remained powerful, despite Obama's own violent anti-terrorist policies.<sup>5</sup>

### Law above Morality

Invoking the memory of the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Airlift after the Second World War, Obama renewed an American commitment to nation-building, as far as Afghanistan and as close as American cities:

This is the moment when we must renew our resolve to rout the terrorists who threaten our security in Afghanistan, and the traffickers who sell drugs on your streets. No one welcomes war. I recognize the enormous difficulties in Afghanistan. But my country and yours have a stake

in seeing that NATO's first mission beyond Europe's borders is a success. For the people of Afghanistan, and for our shared security, the work must be done. America cannot do this alone. The Afghan people need our troops and your troops; our support and your support to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, to develop their economy, and to help them rebuild their nation. We have too much at stake to turn back now.<sup>6</sup>

Obama's vision was progressive and pragmatic, focused on American leadership through democratic alliances and common law that would underpin legitimate force. As a black man, he had credibility when he doubted the effectiveness of lawless power—executed by nonstate and state actors—in defending democracy. Moral self-righteousness was harmful, he argued, when used to justify violence that destroyed an alleged "evil" without attention to the humanity of those targeted, or the prospects for a better alternative. Moral self-righteousness corrupted power when undisciplined by the deliberative and consensus qualities of law.<sup>7</sup>

In his Nobel Peace Prize address and other speeches, Obama echoed the famous midcentury theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who saw tragic "irony" in American efforts to marry power with righteousness, which often produced neither. Niebuhr, like Obama, counseled for more modesty, more attention to trade-offs, and more willingness to accept "lesser evils," rather than the dangerous illusions of perfection. The United States was exceptional, Niebuhr and Obama believed, but not above history or human folly.<sup>8</sup>

Motivated by the immoral consequences of hyper-moralistic rhetoric in recent American history, President Obama spoke from the heart when he criticized the passivity of privileged citizens in the face of injustice at home and abroad. Obama called for a broader and more creative foreign policy, less imprisoned by the atavistic reliance on overwhelming American military power, which had long proven less effective than it first appeared. He wanted more diverse partnerships and intelligent persuasion; less physical posturing and self-righteous certainty. Obama's international outlook mixed American muscle and dollars with advocacy for democratic ideals, assistance from friends, and openness to change—even from old enemies.<sup>9</sup>

The president obviously did not rule out military conflict, but he preferred targeted and limited force, with clear purpose. He opposed continuous and overwhelming warfare that promised, falsely, to translate American military superiority into political domination of distant societies. The wars of the Cold War (in Korea and Vietnam) and later (Yugoslavia,

Kuwait, and Iraq) proved that American strength was often insufficient and counterproductive for national goals. These wars also undermined American claims to democracy and justice, as well as the general standing of the United States in the world. At home and abroad, America's continuous string of military conflicts since 1950 had diminished the country and its ideals, according to Obama.<sup>10</sup>

He sought to tame war with law, and where possible, end American military conflicts (especially in the Middle East) that undermined the values of the nation and its allies. That was his clear and consistent rationale for withdrawing from Iraq, where he believed the U.S. invasion in 2003 had imperiled America's global standing, brutalized its politics, and overburdened its economy. He "surged" American forces in Afghanistan to defeat the remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but the goal there was to withdraw soon and limit the material and idealistic costs of continuous fighting. Obama wanted to replace foreign occupations with multilateral nation-building, and he hoped to return resources to Americans, suffering from a debilitating economic recession at home. "America could best serve the cause of freedom," Obama wrote, "by concentrating on its development, becoming a beacon of hope for other nations and people around the globe."<sup>11</sup>

### Use (and Non-Use) of Force

Obama's emphasis on law had contradictory effects, complicating any assessment of his foreign policy legacy. The president consistently sought to curtail costly military campaigns that included extensive death and destruction. He was skeptical about the legality or morality of war on a large scale. He also doubted the effectiveness of major military campaigns, explaining in part his hesitance and ultimate passivity in the face of genocide in Syria. Obama felt legally and practically constrained against undertaking extensive military action to stop the civil war in Syria, or at least balance the increasing advantage accruing to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's Russian- and Iranian-supported forces. He painfully watched events in Syria, spoke forcefully for regime change, but did very little.

Despite his obvious reluctance to deploy troops in large numbers, Obama's emphasis on legality and his desire to use American power more effectively triggered a surprising increase in executive authority over the use of force. The president perceived terrorist groups—associated with Al-Qaeda, other networks, and later ISIS—as grave threats to the United States. He took his constitutional role as commander-in-chief very seri-

ously. Searching for a legal and lethal mechanism to defeat terrorists, Obama turned to targeted assassinations of enemy combatants, ordered and approved by the president. He also stretched the writ of American intelligence agencies to investigate and disrupt alleged terrorist supporters—both at home and abroad. The Obama administration felt less empowered to start traditional wars, but the president was comfortable using law to justify alternative measures that were more proportional than overwhelming, and more controlled from the White House than from the battlefield or allied counsels. In this sense, the Obama "war doctrine," as some would call it, vastly increased the direct reach of presidential force at the cost of traditional institutions, especially Congress. When seeking approval for its actions, the administration looked to the courts, often in secret, rather than the public or the legislature.

We know the president thought deeply about these matters, and he had reservations about how his actions could empower a more reckless successor. As a good lawyer, he sought to nurture careful procedures for assessing targets, collateral damage, and regional reverberations. He consulted closely with leaders of the military and relevant civilian agencies. Nonetheless, Obama could not avoid the consequence of creating permanent and centralized war powers for the president that were less accountable to American democratic institutions than traditional acts of warfare. He affirmed, as no chief executive had before, the right of the president to kill enemies abroad without notice, based solely on the judgment of his closest advisors. Obama saw this as legal police power liberated from traditional Cold War assumptions about large armies and long occupations; critics at home, and especially abroad, saw it as covert warfare open to dangerous abuses previewed by prior CIA interventions in Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Chile. To some, Obama looked like a new age imperialist, armed with manipulative legal rationalizations.<sup>12</sup>

### Ending the Global War on Terror

Obama's predecessor had a more traditional Cold War mindset that emphasized battlefield force over aerial and other covert technologies—although he was happy to use the latter when he felt they reinforced, but did not substitute for, the human battlefield. George W. Bush's military traditionalism made his goals and actions much easier to understand for proponents and critics alike. Bush's military traditionalism was the "old" way of thinking that Obama was determined to escape.

Speaking to a shaken nation as rescue crews continued to remove mangled bodies from the smoldering remains of the World Trade Center on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush had announced a Global War on Terror that, by 2008, had grown into a global war without end. Bush memorably explained that the war on terror “will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.” Every single one, in all parts of the world: “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. . . . Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”<sup>13</sup>

Bush’s belligerent announcement of the global war on terror was emotional, expansive, and limitless. It reflected the profound anger, fear, and desire for revenge that characterized American attitudes after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Bush’s words were a form of collective venting and public lashing out. They married Cold War muscle to a self-righteousness that fit Bush’s religiosity, but not the next president’s analytical attitude, and his skepticism of moralistic simplicity.<sup>14</sup>

The core problem, as Obama and others observed, was that the “Bush doctrine” extolled a permanent war against an abstract phenomenon in all corners of the globe for all time. The war would not end, according to Bush, until every terrorist was killed. This was a messianic vision more than a practical policy. The American military would set its sights on all groups that housed, supported, or even sympathized with a terrorist network. There could be no end, short of total victory. Three years later, in his second inaugural address, Bush spoke of “ending tyranny in our world” with a combination of religious exuberance and limitless ambition.<sup>15</sup>

Bush’s call for a global war on terror echoed Cold War rhetoric about a global struggle against communism. Bush’s plans for antiterrorist proxy wars replayed the logic of American anticommunist interventions across the world during the Cold War. Assumptions about American dominance, forward military action, regime change, and support for favorable dictators transferred smoothly from the repertoire of Henry Kissinger and other Cold Warriors to the late twentieth-century neoconservatives. It should be no surprise that Kissinger’s influence, in particular, grew during Bush’s presidency.<sup>16</sup>

Obama would have none of that. He thought of himself as the anti-Cold Warrior, the anti-neoconservative, even the anti-Kissinger. That self-

definition deepened as the president’s team took office and sought to define what they were about. In foreign policy, it is always easier to articulate what you are against, instead of what you are for. The president did not have a clear vision of the world he hoped to create, but he knew which mistaken American actions he wanted to reverse, especially in Iraq.

### An Obama Doctrine?

Obama frequently criticized the foreign policy “establishment,” including Bush, Kissinger, and other war hawks. He did not favor overwhelming American dominance, forward military action, regime change, or support for favorable dictators—standard patterns in American policymaking since 1945. The new president’s preference for diplomacy and law defined his earliest actions to unwind his predecessor’s failed, anachronistic policies. As Obama announced near the end of his time in the White House, his aim from the start was to “bury the last remnant of the Cold War” and “extend the hand of friendship” to a world eager to cooperate with the United States, not fight old battles.<sup>17</sup>

If anything, the president looked back to an early twentieth-century world, where American power was global, but less militarized and more multilateral. The early twentieth century was also a formative period for international law, when American figures like Elihu Root, Charles Evans Hughes, William Howard Taft, Henry Stimson, and Felix Frankfurter sought to build an international system governed by rules, consensus, and arbitration, rather than war. They favored multilateral sanctions and joint police actions—as in the cooperative response to China’s Boxer Rebellion—over unfettered national competition. Although most of these earlier policymakers were Republicans, Obama embodied similar aspirations in his efforts to negotiate global reductions in nuclear weapons and carbon dioxide emissions, among other issues. He was not just a multilateralist, but a legal internationalist. He rejected the Democratic Party’s more traditional emphasis on values (democracy and anticommunism) over international law and order.<sup>18</sup>

In defense of a more lawful global system, Obama began by banning torture, drawing down American forces in Iraq, and pledging to close the prison at Guantánamo Bay—all acts of war associated with the Bush administration. Obama made one of his first major foreign trips to Egypt, not Israel, where he intentionally redefined the American image abroad. Instead of dividing the world between those “with us” and those with the terrorists,

he spoke of enduring connections across religious and ethnic lines. Obama called upon listeners “to join together on behalf of the world that we seek—a world where extremists no longer threaten our people, and American troops have come home; a world where Israelis and Palestinians are each secure in a state of their own, and nuclear energy is used for peaceful purposes; a world where governments serve their citizens, and the rights of all God’s children are respected. Those are mutual interests. That is the world we seek. But we can only achieve it together.”<sup>19</sup>

The president was serious about opening the United States to friendlier relations with the citizens of the Middle East, and he hoped to do this by negotiating mutually beneficial deals with their leaders, and those in other regions. Diplomacy was indeed his alternative to war. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, initially appointed by George W. Bush after serving his father, stayed on to serve Obama as well, and he observed the seriousness of the new president’s efforts: “I found the president quite pragmatic on national security and open to compromise on most issues—or, to put it more crassly, to cutting a deal. . . . Obama was the most deliberative president I worked for.”<sup>20</sup>

That is high praise from a leading Republican policymaker. Working closely with Gates and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, Obama reached out to China, Russia, and Iran—perhaps the three most important American regional adversaries—seeking to build a working relationship with each. He refrained from the kind of threatening rhetoric that both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush employed at the start of their presidencies. Obama was measured, discreet, and aspirational in his words. He dropped the aggressive Bush administration phrases that fired up Americans but frightened foreigner observers: “Global War on Terror,” “axis of evil,” “radical Islam,” and “American preeminence.” Instead, Obama spoke of cooperation and partnership. He backed his words with high-level messages of conciliation to leaders in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and other capitals.

## Openings

Acting on behalf of the president’s priorities, Secretary Clinton made Asia the destination for her first foreign trip in office. She pledged to pursue a firm but peaceful working relationship with Beijing that limited Chinese expansion in the region, but also showed respect for the sovereignty and security interests of the mainland. Obama and Clinton hoped to encourage

China to act as a “responsible stakeholder” through a mix of incentives and limits—the latter designed not to insult Beijing or challenge its standing. The new administration sought to become a more active “balancer” in the region, assuring Chinese neighbors of American commitments and engaging the Chinese in productive dialogues. A targeted increase of American force was included in this effort (the “pivot”) designed to be big enough to strengthen American security guarantees to allies, but small enough not to provoke retaliation from Beijing. Obama wanted to increase his deal-making leverage with all actors in the Pacific region.<sup>21</sup>

Trade was a central issue for Washington and its longtime Pacific allies, particularly Japan, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand. The United States led regional negotiations for a far-reaching free trade agreement in 2008, during the last year of the Bush administration. President Obama pushed forward, arguing that more open exchange of goods across countries, and the creation of a larger integrated Pacific market, would stimulate economic growth and political cooperation. It would also create a counterbalance in Asia to China’s rapidly expanding economy.

The Obama administration and eleven other countries signed a final landmark agreement in February 2016, known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The document cemented closer relations among the signatories and it promised to embed the United States deeper in the Pacific as a promoter of trade, innovation, and collective security. Although Donald Trump withdrew from the TPP as one of his first acts as president in 2017, the agreement created the largest single trading bloc in Asia, and it continued to operate for the eleven other signatories, wedding them close to one another and continuing American trade interests. The TPP was an effective act of economic statecraft for the Obama administration in Asia—it increased American influence, counterbalanced China, but did not antagonize Beijing.<sup>22</sup>

In Russia the president also sought to replace the animosity of the last Bush years with more effective diplomacy. During the summer of 2008, Russian leader Vladimir Putin (then serving officially as prime minister) had orchestrated an invasion of the Russian-populated regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the independent post-Soviet nation of Georgia. The Bush administration had condemned this aggression, and frozen relations with Moscow. Obama sought to reopen negotiations with Russia, focusing on mutual interests in combatting terrorism, stabilizing Afghanistan, and reducing nuclear arms—an issue close to the president’s heart. Secretary Clinton famously called this a “reset” in U.S.–Russian relations, where

Washington would not forgive Moscow's recent aggression, but would continue to seek areas of cooperation around common interests. Obama hoped to make Moscow a responsible stakeholder, as he also assured Russia's neighbors of America's continued commitment to their defense.<sup>23</sup>

In Iran the president pursued his most radical peace initiative. From his first days in office, he set out to reverse the virtual war that had existed between the Islamic Republic and the United States since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Millions of Americans could still remember, with anger, the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran and the fifty-two diplomats held hostage by Iranian revolutionaries for 444 humiliating days. The history of U.S.–Iranian animosity, and the contemporary rivalry for influence in the Middle East, made cooperation especially difficult between Washington and Tehran.<sup>24</sup>

Obama was realistic about the challenges and the risks, but he reached out to Iran nonetheless. In May 2009 the president sent a personal letter to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, proposing “cooperation in regional and bilateral relations,” and encouraging an agreement to curtail Tehran's nuclear program. Obama also sent a videotaped message to the Iranian people at the time of their New Year celebrations, on March 20, 2009. He saw Iran as a necessary part of any peace settlement in the Middle East. On the eve of the failed “Green Revolution” in Iran (an event that kicked off the Arab Spring in other countries), he explored various possibilities, unsure of how Tehran would respond, but determined to pursue engagement above all.<sup>25</sup>

Although he expected Washington and Tehran to remain rivals, President Obama anticipated major internal changes in Iran that would encourage openings for American collaboration and the institutionalization of peace in the region. He hoped to wean the United States from its strategic dependence on Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Pakistan, creating a broader balance of power in the region with increased leverage for the United States. Obama wanted to build more partnerships focused on specific problems, including counterterrorism and economic development, as he withdrew American soldiers.

Mounting evidence of Tehran's efforts to deploy a nuclear weapon reinforced White House desires to negotiate, but they also motivated Congress and the president to impose severe sanctions on Iranian banking and trade. This was what Obama administration officials came to call a “dual track”—a mix of carrots and sticks aimed at encouraging Iranian compromise on American terms. Obama was adamant about wanting to prevent nuclear

proliferation, especially in the Middle East. He increased American diplomatic options to pursue his ambitious goals of regional peace and “global zero”—elimination of all nuclear weapons.<sup>26</sup>

Those who alleged that the president had grown “soft” were contradicted by his rapid increase in targeted killings of terrorists through a mix of aerial drone strikes and U.S. special forces operations—including the famous May 2, 2011, raid on Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan. Obama's lawyers worked hard to create new legal authorizations to justify targeted killings, even as they claimed the country was committing out of war, and returning to more vigorous due process protections. As before, the president wanted more diplomatic and military tools for law enforcement and peace promotion overseas, not permanent war or occupation. He remained committed to international legal policing power, rather than arbitrary violence or unilateral power projection.<sup>27</sup>

Obama's first years in office marked a self-conscious shift away from the obsession with force and dominance in the Cold War and the Global War on Terror years. The president continued to use America's formidable military capabilities, but with more self-imposed legal, political, and strategic limitations. He wanted to make American power more targeted and balanced between military and nonmilitary dimensions. He aimed for precision above preponderance, lawfulness above moral self-righteousness. To his critics on the right, this seemed like too little forcefulness and too little assertion. To his critics on the left, Obama was justifying a permanent covert war president, with too much unilateral power. The White House was often caught between these two camps.

Obama sought to use his controversial powers by redoubling his cooperative efforts across the globe. He continued to push for American national interests in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, but he worked vigorously to build alliances and negotiate with adversaries. Most of all, Obama avoided simple binaries between friends and enemies, or “us” versus “them.” He spoke and acted as if there were possibilities for cooperation with a wide range of states, some of which supported terrorists. Obama even considered negotiations with the terrorists themselves.

The first black president was, in many ways, a classical liberal internationalist—perhaps more than any president since Franklin Roosevelt. Like Roosevelt, Obama was deliberative. He sought to win over challengers and achieve his aims, short of war. Obama had thought deeply about the prior seventy years of American foreign policy, and the permanent state of international crisis. He endeavored to avoid wars wherever possible, manage the



use of force tightly, and make certain that the full range of American resources were matched to clear and important political aims. Obama wanted to erase the militaristic Cold War mentality that he saw in the Global War on Terror. He made a compelling case for dialing back on military crises, and dialing up on diplomacy and persuasion—even in a world filled with anti-American aggressors.

### Mixed Results

Looking back on Obama's time in office, one can see many important achievements for his liberal internationalism. He reversed more than fifty-five years of Cuban–American hostility, turning a powerful source of anti-American hostility in the Western Hemisphere into an opportunity for newfound American trade and travel. Even Obama's most vocal Republican adversaries, including Texas governor Greg Abbott, have replaced their Cold War threats toward Cuban aggression with a public embrace of new openings on the island. The Cold War and the Global War on Terror froze Cuban–American hostility, and increased the power of Fidel and Raúl Castro as anti-American icons. Obama's emphasis on diplomacy and engagement allowed him to make progress where ten previous presidents—from Eisenhower to Bush—could not.

More controversially, President Obama negotiated and then implemented a comprehensive agreement with ten international signatories that halted Iranian nuclear weapons development for at least a decade. Despite organized (but not majority) opposition at home and abroad, the president used all of his available leverage to craft an enforceable framework for verifying that Iranian nuclear facilities were closed, while incentivizing broader cooperation. As part of the deal, the United States returned Iranian money seized in the United States after 1979, and it dropped some (but not all) of the sanctions that crippled Iran's economic development. The full effects of the Iranian nuclear deal remain uncertain, but President Obama succeeded—as his predecessors did not—in opening real possibilities for cooperation between Washington, Tehran, and other allies around regional and global issues. He increased American leverage in Iran and other societies by giving the United States greater access to their people, as well as their leaders.

The most obvious failure of Obama's foreign policy was in Russia. If anything, the eight years of his presidency witnessed the poisoning of what were still promising ties between the United States and Russia in

2008, and a return to Cold War hostilities. By the summer of 2016, Russia was following a Soviet script of challenging NATO forces in Europe, invading neighboring states (Ukraine, and especially the Ukrainian province of Crimea), aiding Middle Eastern strongmen (Bashar al-Assad in Syria), and harboring spies with valuable American secrets (Edward Snowden), and attacking American information networks (cyber-warfare.) Vladimir Putin went a step beyond where even Soviet leaders feared to tread, intervening directly in an American presidential election to support a candidate (Donald Trump) strangely susceptible to the Russian president's influence. Marrying traditional KGB tactics to cyber-warfare and social media savvy, Putin helped to create a Manchurian Candidate bent on weakening American power from within. Putin also made Russia a recognized military and cyber-threat to the functioning of democratic elections throughout Europe and North America. He became a unifying strategic adversary for Western leaders, including members of the U.S. Congress who agreed on tightening sanctions, despite partisan differences and presidential opposition.<sup>28</sup>

In light of these troubling events, Obama's attempted “reset” with Russia looks naïve and potentially disastrous for American national interests. Washington's conciliatory moves appear to have encouraged Putin's aggression in Europe, the Middle East, and other regions. Divisions within the United States and NATO also appear to have reduced Putin's fears of retaliation. With increasing Russian boldness and aggression, the possibilities of a major war, including nuclear weapons, have grown considerably—either due to inadvertent crisis escalation, miscalculation, or misperception by decision-makers on one side of the escalating conflict.

Not only does the rhetoric echo the Cold War, so do the growing tensions surrounding Russian and American military forces deployed in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Since 2014 Russian air and sea forces have conducted intentionally provocative moves near NATO-deployed planes and ships. Russia has ended all adherence to recent nuclear agreements, increasing the size of its nuclear stockpile and the number of available delivery vehicles.<sup>29</sup>

The nuclear arms race has returned, and Obama reluctantly made efforts to modernize the American arsenal in response. In 2015 the United States participated in a Cold War–style military exercise with its NATO allies—the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union—simulating a war with Russia in Europe. In 2016 a second such exercise took place, with a focus on protecting Poland's integrity against a feared Russian invasion.

These were hardly the antiwar efforts that Obama hoped to lead when he announced an end to permanent war less than eight years earlier. Just the opposite.

The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) followed a similar pattern. With the withdrawal of American soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, a new terrorist organization emerged, led by poorly educated Islamic leaders who were radicalized in American-run prisons, where they also formed new political networks. Released into collapsing societies, they organized a media-savvy transnational organization that mobilized adherents seeking to overturn Western power and build an alternative state. They used terror to intimidate enemies and they ran proto-state institutions in the Middle East to sell oil, collect taxes, and finance violent operations. Amid a civil war that fragmented Syria, ISIS exploited the cracks in that society and others to establish pockets of power. ISIS directed its violent efforts nearby, and as far as Belgium and Somalia. It inspired copy-cats even farther afield, including within the United States.<sup>30</sup>

Obama's attempts at Middle East reconciliation, beginning with his 2009 speech in Egypt, did not work. His military de-escalation might have enabled the rise of ISIS, despite American successes in killing Al-Qaeda leaders through targeted drone attacks and special forces operations. Without a fighting army on the ground, the United States left a vacuum that the most extreme and violent groups filled. ISIS exploited the militarization of the region, the resentments of so many residents, and the absence of a force capable of enforcing order. Obama's liberal internationalism failed to stop a Middle Eastern descent into Hobbesian "state of war" conditions, including public executions, mass emigration, and genocide.

Despite continuous urgings, the president did not intervene to stop the horror around ISIS because he did not see an exit strategy. The same was true for events in Russia. Obama and his European allies did not perceive a benefit in provoking war with Vladimir Putin. In both settings the president chose to curtail his hopes for cooperation. He acted to contain but not destroy threatening actors, as he avoided direct American embroilment on the ground.

In a famous set of interviews with journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama threw up his hands: "There are going to be times where either because it's not a direct threat to us or because we just don't have the tools in our toolkit to have a huge impact that, tragically, we have to refrain from jumping in with both feet." Tragic indeed, and perhaps wise, but certainly not satisfying for a country that defines itself as the leader of the free world.<sup>31</sup>

### The Tragedy of Obama's Foreign Policy

Obama's liberal internationalism did not reject force or idealism, but it cautiously avoided warfare at almost all costs. The first black president excavated an American sensibility from before the Second World War, when international thinkers like William Howard Taft and Herbert Hoover—as well as Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois—argued that war could only be the very last resort for policy. Like Taft and Hoover, Obama accepted the tragedy of a terribly imperfect international system, he sought to improve it slowly through diplomacy and negotiation, and he avoided the whirlwind of full-scale military conflict, if at all possible.<sup>32</sup>

Although it seems cowardly to some, there is an admirable courage in acknowledging, as Carl von Clausewitz famously wrote, that war is stubbornly unpredictable and often deeply counterproductive, even for the modern Napoleon, or Bush, or Putin. A president who commands the most powerful modern military, but also identifies with the helplessness of citizens targeted for lynching, incarceration, and other frequent brutalities has reasons to doubt the efficacy of mass violence. Obama's hesitance in confronting Putin and ISIS was born of pessimism about not only the practicality of force, but also its broader implications. He doubted that fighting one set of bad guys with overwhelming force would really help the suffering who do not need more war, but instead more opportunity and law.<sup>33</sup>

The mixed and unsatisfying foreign policy legacy of such a thoughtful and "deliberative" president (as described by a Republican, Robert Gates) raises uncomfortable questions for observers. Is it possible to lead a powerful nation, with extensive international ambitions, and avoid military conflict? Can a global hegemon live by law, rather than war? Is non-intervention in the face of tragedy better than flawed but righteous action?<sup>34</sup>

The major achievement of Obama's foreign policy was that he tried to answer these questions by minimizing and targeting force, emphasizing law and nonmilitary tools wherever possible. This liberal internationalist approach allowed him to create openings in Cuba and Iran that ended longstanding Cold War conflicts. These openings have the potential to improve millions of lives and benefit the United States, among other nations.

The glaring failure of Obama's foreign policy was that even when he used force, through drone strikes or regime overthrow in Libya, his hesitations and tentativeness limited his ability to affect change on the ground. Adversaries like Putin and Assad discounted his attempts at deterrence. Often correctly, they assumed he would not retaliate effectively against their

aggression. Allies (especially in the Middle East, but also in Asia and Europe) had their confidence in American commitments shaken. They were not as certain as they once were under Washington's security umbrella.

Bullies at home and abroad grew stronger, while Obama avoided direct confrontation. Violent and hateful actors lingered, ominously, on his watch. Shockingly, one of them replaced him as president.

The 2015 and 2016 NATO military exercises were necessary to reinforce alliance confidence, but they were not nearly enough after Putin's brutal invasion of Crimea and his escalating meddling in foreign elections. Russian aggression and the continuing genocidal violence in Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East will be as much a part of Obama's liberal internationalist legacy as his praise-worthy openings to Cuba and Iran. His foreign policy record was hopeful, tragic, and deeply contradictory. The same could be said of Obama's domestic record, inherited by President Donald Trump and a white nationalist Republican Party in control of Congress after 2016.<sup>35</sup>

### The Irony of the First African American President

The irony is that for the first African American president, race mattered in his foreign policy, but not as anyone expected. Historians will not remember Obama as a president who democratized international affairs by opening policy to new ethnic groups, or expanding the dialogue about race and foreign affairs. He did some of that, but it was not his consistent priority. He was not a great liberator.

Obama will have enduring influence as the only U.S. leader since the Second World War to challenge the close connection between war and American policy. He personally felt the brutalizing consequences of American power as no other president had, at least since Abraham Lincoln. Obama worked throughout his two terms to remove the murderous "shock and awe," and replace it with precision, balance, and careful limitations. He wanted to tame American power, to make it lawful, which also meant to make it less abusive.

International politics, like domestic politics, are inherently violent, and the violence is often uncontrolled. American power in the last century has come largely from a preponderance of violent capabilities, and presidents have used that preponderance to pursue their foreign policy aims. That is why we refer to the "Cold War" and the "Global War on Terror."

President Obama moved away from these phrases and the preponderance of violence to seek authority in new controls, especially through law. He aimed to make American politics less violent and more inclusive—and that applied to citizens at home, and peoples abroad. Obama sought to discipline the corrupting and self-serving tendencies of dominant force. What else should we expect from someone who personally felt the perils of uncontrolled violence, and relied on the law for his safety? What else should we expect from a man who led a country where the fires of race hatred continued to burn (witnessed by recurring mass shootings in Charleston and Orlando, among other cities), and civility depended on constitutional institutions and habits, not any broad moral consensus among citizens? If anything, moral arguments about guns, abortion, immigration, and human rights divided Americans in Obama's time. Cold Wars were personal wars for Obama that he wanted to extinguish through law, even at the cost of deeply held convictions.

President Obama's sophisticated and sometime contradictory worldview failed to persuade many at home and abroad. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his aggressive advocacy of militaristic protectionism were stinging rejections of Obama's liberal internationalism. Trump also abandoned the Cold War consensus on alliances, deterrence, and Russian containment—embraced most proudly by the Republican Party before his election.

Trump and Obama shared dissatisfaction with what had been seventy years of conventional wisdom on American foreign policy. Future historians will define their presidencies as the abrupt end of the Cold War era. The future will be determined by the contest between liberal internationalism and militaristic protectionism that Obama's presidency opened. The first African American president began an international reconstruction moment—with all the partisanship, violence, and uncertainty of prior reconstructions.

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7. For a revealing account of Obama's evolving thinking about race, law, and power, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

8. Obama was deeply moved by his reading of Niebuhr's most influential book, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952).

9. This analysis of the president's pragmatic liberal internationalism matches James T. Kloppenberg's analysis of Obama's intellectual roots in pragmatic political philosophy. See Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hopes, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 457–513.

10. Andrew Bacevich makes a similar argument. See *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

11. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 281. Obama drew on John Quincy Adams and other early American thinkers in writing these words, and he criticized the excessive interventionism of Cold War and post-Cold War American policymakers.

12. For good discussions of these issues that capture Obama's search for an alternative legal doctrine, and its dangers, see, among others: David J. Barron, *Waging War: The Clash between Presidents and Congress, 1776 to ISIS* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: Inside Obama's Post-9/11 Presidency* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015); David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown, 2012).

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21. See Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 57–61; John Lee, "Reaching the Limits: China as a Responsible Stakeholder," July 5, 2016, Project 2049 Institute, [http://www.project2049.net/documents/160705\\_Lee\\_Reaching%20the%20Limits\\_China\\_Responsibile%20Stakeholder.pdf](http://www.project2049.net/documents/160705_Lee_Reaching%20the%20Limits_China_Responsibile%20Stakeholder.pdf).

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23. See Chollet, *The Long Game*, 64–66.

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