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Considered a Foreign Policy Neophyte, Barack Obama Emerges as One of the Nation's Most Competent Commanders in Chief

Howard Manly

During the 2008 presidential campaign, the main criticism against Barack Obama was that he was too green to lead America's foreign policy and military.

It was a charge that Republican conservatives made against Democratic candidates with predictable frequency and had become a proven winning strategy after Ronald Reagan steamrolled perceived military bumbler Jimmy Carter in 1980. Conventional wisdom suggested that strategy would work even better against Obama.

A liberal Democrat with an Islamic name, Barack Hussein Obama had as a state senator delivered a speech at an anti-war rally in Chicago and blasted what he considered the Bush administration's "dumb war" in Iraq. If that were not enough to haunt Obama and convince conservative voters that Obama could not be trusted to protect U.S. interests, his conciliatory statements on Islam were tantamount to burning the American flag after September 11, 2001.

The Republican National Committee took it a step further. In a particularly nasty television advertisement, the RNC painted Obama as no more than a media darling and spliced his pictures with those of pop cultural figures Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. The voice-over asked: “He’s the biggest celebrity in the world, but is he ready to lead?”

Unfazed, Obama took the offensive throughout the 2008 campaign. He threatened preemptive strikes against Pakistan for harboring terrorists. He vowed to wage war in Afghanistan against al Qaeda. In a somewhat jarring contrast to his campaign stump speeches that promised “hope” and “change,” Obama frequently mentioned hunting down terrorists wherever they were—and killing them.

Obama was not just campaigning. He has proven true to his word on the fight against terrorism. Since his historic election, Obama as commander-in-chief has been willing to pull the trigger and protect U.S. interests. Ironically, Obama said as much during his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. Conceding that the “moral force of nonviolence” has a place in modern-day diplomacy and that there was “nothing naïve” in the beliefs of Gandhi or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Obama was also quick to point out that he was sworn to “protect and defend” the United States.

“I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people,” Obama said. “For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.”

In a move that foreshadowed his military decision-making, Obama authorized within the first four months of his administration the military rescue of Richard Phillips, the American sea captain taken hostage by pirates in the waters off Somalia. The mission resulted in the deaths of three pirates and the capture of the fourth—and freed Phillips.

That mission underscored the frenetic pace of the Obama administration during its first 100 days. Within a short amount of time, Obama approved the massive expansion of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, increased drone attacks against the Taliban in Pakistan, and launched efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Most important, he stepped up efforts to hunt and kill America’s number one enemy—Osama bin Laden.



Attention!

President Barack Obama salutes as he boards Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base in suburban Maryland outside Washington, D.C. in February 2011. White House Photo by Pete Souza.

That day finally occurred on May 2, 2011 when Navy Seal Team 6 raided Bin Laden's compound in Pakistan and killed the mastermind behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The successful raid also destroyed another bogey-man—that Obama was incapable of leading an effective war against terrorism.

Under the Obama administration, virtually every major al Qaeda affiliate has lost its key leader or operational commander, and more than half of al Qaeda's top leadership has been eliminated. President Obama's counter-terrorism advisor, John Brennan, explained in June 2011: "We have affected al Qaeda's ability to attract new recruits. We've made it harder for them to hide and transfer money, and pushed al Qaeda's finances to its weakest point in years."

Among the dead: Sheik Saeed al-Masri, al Qaeda's third-ranking leader; Baitullah Mahsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban; Abu Ayyub al-Masri, leader of al Qaeda in Iraq; and Harun Fazul, the al Qaeda leader in East Africa and the mastermind of the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa. Also among the dead are Anwar al-Awlaki, killed on September 30, 2011 by a CIA drone strike in Yemen. Born in New Mexico, al-Awlaki had dual citizenship in the U.S. and Yemen, and was considered one of al Qaeda's most prominent and effective propagandists. U.S. officials had tied him to the attempted bombing of a commercial aircraft on approach to Detroit and the attempted downing of two cargo planes over the United States. Those officials said he inspired an Army officer who is charged with killing 13 people in a November 2009 shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, and a Pakistani-American man who tried to set off a car bomb in New York City in May 2010.

Unfortunately, Obama, plagued by enormous domestic problems and staunch conservative opposition during a presidential election cycle, has been unable to put his own stamp on U.S. foreign policy. In fact, Obama has maintained many of the policies that he campaigned against. From the Guantanamo Bay prison and the treatment of suspected terrorists to his steadfast opposition to Palestinian efforts to gain recognition in the United Nations, Obama has taken a long-established approach in U.S. foreign policy that has served short-term political interests at the expense of the oft-stated, long-term goals of establishing democracy throughout the world.



Top Ranking

President Barack Obama talks with, from left, Army Gen. Ray Odierno, Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, and Adm. James "Sandy" Winnefeld in the Oval Office in May 2011. The President later nominated Dempsey to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Winnefeld to be its Vice Chairman, and Odierno to be Army Chief of Staff. White House Photo by Pete Souza.

Nowhere is that incongruity more evident than in the Obama administration's handling of Palestine. In 2010, Obama stood before the U.N. General Assembly and asked for Palestinian statehood by 2011. "We should reach for what's best within ourselves," Obama said at the time. "If we do, when we come back here next year, we can have an agreement that will lead to a new member of the United Nations: an independent, sovereign state of Palestine, living at peace with Israel."

A year later, Obama went before the same assembly without such an agreement and threatened to veto any proposal for Palestinian statehood. "One year ago," Obama acknowledged, "I stood at this podium and called for an independent Palestine. I believed then, and I believe now, that the Palestinian people deserve a state of their own. But what I also said at the time is that genuine peace can only be realized between Israelis and Palestinians themselves."

It was an embarrassing moment for Obama. Like no other president before him, Obama is aware that he is viewed as the shiny example of the

rewards of democracy. But as an American president, Obama had to put U.S. interests ahead of his own message of “hope” and “change.” He had committed himself to making peace between Palestine and Israel, but had been unable to even start negotiations between the two since taking office.

Worse, Obama had championed democracies in Ivory Coast, Tunisia, South Sudan, and Egypt, and was seen as being on the right side of Arab Spring in a region long plagued by tyrannical regimes often backed by the U.S. government. “We saw in those protestors the moral force of nonviolence that has lit the world from Delhi to Warsaw, from Selma to South Africa—and we knew that change had come to Egypt and to the Arab world.” But not in Palestine.

Noted scholar Daniele Archibugi puts the idea of exporting democracy in historical context. Since the end of World War II, America has achieved that goal through military intervention in two small countries, Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989). Its other successes are in three enemy nations occupied during or after World War II: Japan (1945-1952), Italy (1943-1945), and West Germany (1945-1949).

In Archibugi’s judgment, U.S. efforts to export democracy has failed in a long list of militarily-occupied countries, including its first occupation of Panama (1903-1936). The record includes South Korea (1945-1950), South Vietnam (1964-1973), Cambodia (1970-1973), Afghanistan (2002-), and Iraq (2003-2011). The list also includes Kosovo (1999 -), Bosnia (1995 -), Haiti (1915-1934, 1995 -), Somalia (1993-1994), Laos (1964-1974), Dominican Republic (1916-1924, 1965-1966), Russia (1918-1922), Cuba (1898-1902, 1904-1909, 1917-1922), Mexico (1914), and Nicaragua (1909-1933).

Surprisingly, even with the blurring of U.S. policy with Obama’s vision for a new world order, the one area where Obama is given the most credit is the very thing that his political opponents blasted him for during his presidential campaign—national security. In part, those solid poll numbers are attributable to Obama’s unwavering stance in favor of democratic governance—despite its expense and failure to spread in the most volatile regions of the world. Even Winston Churchill during the onset of the Cold War recognized the faults of democracies, once quipping to the House of Commons in 1947 that it “was the worst system except all others.” And if anyone gave greater proof of democratic ideals, it was Obama, the first African-American president.

“I believed then—and I believe now,” Obama said in 2009 during his famous speech in Cairo, “that we have a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals. The status quo is not sustainable. Societies held together by fear and repression may offer the illusion of stability for a time, but they are built upon fault lines that will eventually tear asunder.”

But the chief reason for the spike in poll numbers was the death of Bin Laden. At the time, public confidence in government’s ability to tackle tough budgetary and economic issues remained low. But several national polls told a different story when it came to Obama’s handling of national security. According to Rasmussen Reports in its July 15, 2011 poll, 51 percent gave the president good or excellent marks on his handling of national security issues, while 28 percent rated him poor on those issues.

Two months earlier, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that, “Slightly more than half said they liked the way he was handling foreign policy generally, up from 39 percent in April. About 6 in 10 approved of his handling of Afghanistan, up from 44 percent in January. And more than 7 in 10 supported his handling of the terrorism threat, up from about half in August 2010. Perhaps least surprising, more than 8 in 10 said they supported his handling of the pursuit of Bin Laden.”

What has been more politically troublesome to the Obama administration may very well have little to do with actual foreign threats, but much to do with public outrage over the national economy, the size of the government budget, and the cost of foreign interventions. In fact, Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen asserted that “the most significant threat to our national security is our debt.”

The numbers are staggering. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz estimated that direct government spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had amounted to roughly \$2 trillion by July 2011—\$17,000 for every American household. A Congressional Research Service report offered even more disturbing data: the costs of the two wars alone accounted for 23 percent of the combined budget deficits between fiscal years 2003 and 2010. The ultimate cost, at least according to the Eisenhower Research Project, could end up being as high as \$4 trillion, including medical care and disability for current and future war veterans.



Rallying the Troops

President Barack Obama waves to U.S. troops at Bagram Airfield north of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, in March 2010. White House Photo by Pete Souza.

Those figures are just for the two wars. Between FY1998 and FY2012, the baseline defense budget (in constant dollars and exclusive of war funding) has grown to \$553 billion from \$374 billion—an increase of close to 50 percent. Setting the agenda now is the debt-limit deal that calls for cutting more than \$2 trillion from federal spending over the next decade.

Under that compromise, Obama agreed to slice \$350 billion from projected military spending over the next ten years. The deal leaves open the possibility of up to \$500 billion in additional reductions. In the initial phase, all security spending—for defense, homeland security, veterans, foreign aid, and intelligence—would be cut from the current level of \$687 billion to \$683 billion in next year's budget. Defense would take a share of that \$4 billion reduction.

By most accounts, the Defense Department could absorb a budget cut of as much as 15 percent without sacrificing readiness and global commitments. Even Colin Powell, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former secretary of state, said he saw no reason for military expenditures to remain unscathed from budget-cutting measures—especially as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are drawn to an end.

“When the Cold War ended 20 years ago, when I was chairman and Mr. Cheney was Secretary of Defense, we cut the defense budget by 25 percent,” Powell said in a widely-publicized national television interview. “And we reduced the force by 500,000 active-duty soldiers, so it can be done. Now, how fast you can do it and what you have to cut out remains to be seen, but I don’t think the defense budget can be made, you know, sacrosanct and it can’t be touched.”

But a trillion dollars? Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has already described a reduction of that level as a “doomsday” scenario that would mean “dangerous across-the-board defense cuts that would do real damage to our security, our troops and their families and our ability to protect the nation.” The former White House budget chief in the Clinton administration further called the cuts “completely unacceptable” and vowed to fight them. “People expect the military to provide for our security,” Panetta told reporters in August 2011.

Panetta’s call to arms was supported by at least one card-carrying member of the military establishment. His predecessor two times removed, Donald H. Rumsfeld, who served in both Bush administrations and oversaw wars in Iraq and Iran, wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion article that Panetta’s main challenge, beyond successfully concluding the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, will be fending off White House and congressional “raids” on defense spending. “The conventional wisdom seems to be that, as a former budget director, Mr. Panetta will know how to skillfully draw down the Pentagon in the ‘postwar’ period to come,” Rumsfeld wrote. “We ought to wish him success in proving the conventional wisdom wrong.”

Potential cuts and cost-saving measures are well-known. The War-time Contracting Commission, created by Congress in 2008, estimated that at least \$31 billion and as much as \$60 billion has been lost in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade due to inadequate oversight of contractors, poor planning, inadequate competition, and corruption. The bipartisan commission urged both Congress and the Obama administration to overhaul the oversight process that manages how the government awards and manages contracts for battlefield support and reconstruction projects.

Another potential target is the Medium Extended Air Defense System, a missile defense program in conjunction with Italy and Germany.

The Pentagon said earlier this year it would not implement the program, though research will continue for two more years at a cost of more than \$800 million.

Yet another target is the multibillion-dollar F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the next-generation aircraft for the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. The Obama administration has all but admitted that the F-35 has been a costly mistake. In issuing a stop-work order last year, the Defense Department wrote, “In our view it is a waste of taxpayer money that can be used to fund higher departmental priorities, and should be ended now.”

Ten years in, the program has been plagued by cost overruns and delays. The cost of each aircraft has gone from \$69 million to \$133 million; the total cost of buying more than 2,400 F-35s has jumped from \$233 billion to \$385 billion.

Obama has publicly stated the obvious but is reluctant to cut the military budget for legitimate security reasons and more pressing domestic political realities. “Over the last decade,” Obama said, “we have spent a trillion dollars on war, at a time of rising debt and hard economic times. Now, we must invest in America’s greatest resource—our people. We must unleash innovation that creates new jobs and industry, while living within our means.”

It remains unclear just how Obama will balance those needs with what president Dwight D. Eisenhower forewarned about the military industrial complex. A case in point is the longstanding partnership with NATO. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO’s reason for being—fear of a Soviet land invasion and threat of nuclear war—came into question. It has remained intact—and even expanded from sixteen members at the conclusion of the Cold War to twenty-eight now—but European reluctance to expand defense budgets has created what amounts to a two-tier alliance: the U.S. military at one level and the other twenty-seven NATO members on an almost bargain-basement level.

Over the past two years, military spending by NATO’s European members has shrunk by about \$45 billion—the equivalent of the entire annual defense budget of Germany, one of the alliance’s top-spending members. As a result, the U.S. defense budget of nearly \$700 billion accounts for nearly 75 percent of the total defense spending by NATO mem-

bers. The combined military spending of all twenty-six European members is just above \$220 billion. Canada is the other NATO member.

Arguably the most important challenge Obama faces as he confronts looming budgetary restraints coupled with lingering perceptions that he is soft on defense is his ability to avoid committing the country to another costly war. Given the gap between U.S. interests and Obama's stated political beliefs, it will remain assured that Obama will serve the needs of the country first—with a careful eye on both human and financial costs. Unlike the Bush administration, which launched wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to hunt and capture "dead or alive" Osama bin Laden, Obama has navigated those well-intentioned priorities with a reasonable level of military involvement.

His decision to lead a limited, NATO-sponsored attack against Libya—which ultimately led to the brutal death of Moammar Qaddafi—reveals just how far Obama has come from the early days of his political career. "Now, let me be clear," then-state senator Obama said in a speech at an anti-Iraq war protest on Oct. 2, 2002 in Chicago. "I suffer no illusions about Saddam Hussein. He is a brutal man. A ruthless man. A man who butchers his own people to secure his own power. The world, and the Iraqi people, would be better off without him."

But Obama argued at the time that deposing Saddam militarily was not necessary, because Iraq posed no "direct threat" to the United States. Obama also cited Iraq's weakened economy and the fact that it was still possible to contain Saddam's aggression, repudiating the Bush administration's rationale that Saddam posed too great a threat to American interests and his own people to be left in power.

"I don't oppose all wars," Obama explained. "What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war. What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by [the Bush administration] to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne."

But President Obama had a quite different tune when it came to Qaddafi. In his March 28, 2011 speech justifying his decision to lead an attack on Libya, Obama cited Qaddafi's record of brutality, saying that allowing Qaddafi to continue his brutality was not an option.

“Qaddafi declared he would show ‘no mercy’ to his own people,” said President Obama. “He compared them to rats, and threatened to go door to door to inflict punishment. In the past, we have seen him hang civilians in the streets, and kill over a thousand people in a single day. We knew that if we waited, if we waited one more day, Benghazi, a city nearly the size of Charlotte, could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world. But when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act.”

It was the right thing to do—despite complaints from some members of Congress that Obama violated the War Powers Act. One critic was Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana. The senior Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voiced the concerns of many Republican leaders by wanting to know the precise U.S. military role in Libya and how a nation strained by two existing wars and mushrooming budget deficits could pay the tab.

“Who knows how long this goes on and, furthermore, who has budgeted for Libya at all?” said Lugar on NBC’s “Meet the Press” at the time of the attack. “I don’t believe we should be engaged in a Libyan civil war. The fact is we don’t have particular ties with anybody in the Libyan picture. It is not a vital interest to the United States.”

Republican Representative Roscoe Bartlett of Maryland, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, disagreed with Obama, making an even sharper point. “The United States does not have a King’s army,” he said. “President Obama’s unilateral choice to use U.S. military force in Libya is an affront to our Constitution.”

Even Democratic Representative Dennis Kucinich of Ohio remained opposed to the operation. “We have already spent trillions of dollars on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which descended into unwinnable quagmires,” Kucinich wrote his colleagues. “Now, the president is plunging the United States into yet another war we cannot afford.”

To that, Obama explained that he was well within his right as commander in chief to protect “U.S. interests,” a position that he did not hold when he served in the U.S. Senate. On the question of President George W. Bush’s constitutional authority to bomb Iran without seeking authorization from Congress, Senator Obama told the *Boston Globe*:

“The president does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stop-

ping an actual or imminent threat to the nation. As commander in chief, the president does have a duty to protect and defend the United States. In instances of self-defense, the president would be within his constitutional authority to act before advising Congress or seeking its consent.”

Given the perilous situations in other Middle Eastern and African nations, Obama’s definition of self-defense clearly expanded when it came to Libya but not Somalia, Syria, or even Mexico, where thousands of violent deaths have occurred at the hands of drug cartels right along the American border.

“As I said when the United States joined an international coalition to intervene,” President Obama explained, “we cannot prevent every injustice perpetrated by a regime against its people, and we have learned from our experience in Iraq just how costly and difficult it is to try to impose regime change by force—no matter how well-intentioned it may be. But in Libya, we saw the prospect of imminent massacre. We had a mandate for action, and heard the Libyan people’s call for help. Had we not acted along with our NATO allies and regional coalition partners, thousands would have been killed. The message would have been clear: Keep power by killing as many people as it takes.”

Under the congressional War Powers Act, the president has the authority to launch U.S. actions for 60 to 90 days before seeking authorization from Congress. In a letter to Congress, Obama said he authorized the involvement of the U.S. military as part of a “multilateral response authorized under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973.”

“I have directed these actions, which are in the national security and foreign policy interests of the United States, pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct U.S. foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive,” he said.

Obama had an unlikely supporter of his actions in Libya—former presidential rival John McCain of Arizona.

McCain, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said during an interview with CBS’ “The Early Show” that the military strikes were necessary because there would have been “a horrible blood bath” without international intervention.

On ABC’s “This Week,” McCain further criticized Republican presidential hopefuls and congressional leaders who questioned the country’s

military involvement there. “There has always been an isolationist strain in the Republican Party,” McCain said. “But now it seems to have moved more center stage...That is not the Republican Party that has been willing to stand up for freedom for people all over the world.”

On that at least, McCain and Obama agreed.

“There must be no doubt that the United States of America welcomes change that advances self-determination and opportunity,” Obama said. “Yes, there will be perils that accompany this moment of promise. But after decades of accepting the world as it is ... We have a chance to pursue the world as it should be.”

While Obama has made it clear that no nation should dictate the type of government another nation should adhere to, Obama has also made it clear that he is fully committed to governments that adhere to the will of the people. “No matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who hold power,” Obama said during his 2009 speech in Cairo. “You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy.”

It would be a grave misfortune if the very same ingredients that led to the election of the nation’s first African-American president ultimately led to Obama’s defeat in the 2012 presidential election. With jobs and the national economy on the forefront of the American voting public—and a vocal and organized opposition dedicated to making Obama a one-term president—Obama’s capable handling of the U.S. military and foreign policy may go largely unnoticed, except by pacifists on his party’s left unhappy about the two wars continuing so long. But Obama has clearly made an impact on American military and foreign policy, though far less than even he would admit.

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