Singh, Robert. "A Post-American Foreign Policy for the Post-American World."
Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement. London:
Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 1–20. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780931111.ch-001>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023,
11:02 UTC.

Copyright © Robert Singh 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only,
provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the
Creative Commons licence.

1

A Post-American Foreign Policy for the Post-American World

The day I take the oath of office, the world will look at us differently.

—US Senator Barack Obama, 2006¹

If there's just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy, that's an easier negotiation. But that's not the world we live in.

—President Barack Obama, 2009²

Whether intellect is the crucial attribute for a leader; whether less cerebral traits, such as courage or honesty or diligence, are more important; and whether brains can get in the way of these – these are ancient arguments all republics face. Richard Nixon had the best raw intellect of any president since Woodrow Wilson and look where it got him. The former editor of the Harvard Law Review who sits in the White House shows signs of being in over his head.

—Christopher Caldwell³

If he goes down in history as a poor leader, it will be a sad outcome for a man deemed to be a transformational figure at the start. Obama began his presidency intending to set the agenda and so much more. He was, by definition, a historic president – the first African-American, vanquisher of a hapless and aging opponent. Some saw him as the next FDR, and he seemed to buy into his own press when he promoted ambitious plans to stimulate the economy and remake health care. Now we're left to contemplate one of the enduring mysteries of this presidency: how a man who came from nowhere in 2008 to dominate the national agenda – much as Reagan did – lost control of it so completely once he entered the Oval Office.

—Michael Hirsh, “The Decider?”⁴

Introduction

Four years after a momentous victory in the 2008 presidential election that was celebrated around the world, Barack Obama's foreign policy excites little of the passionate intensity or global animosity of his controversial and polarizing predecessor, George W. Bush. Instead, as President Obama seeks a second term in the White House in 2012, domestic matters dominate the American public's evaluation of his stewardship of the United States. Popular attentions remain resolutely focused on the Great Recession and the multiple manifestations of a seemingly precipitous national decline since the financial crash of 2008: a fragile and faltering economy, a projected budget deficit for 2011–12 of \$1,580 billion, a \$14.6 trillion (and increasing) sovereign national debt, a downgraded national credit rating, and a myriad of disconcerting domestic discontents from a stubbornly persistent 9 percent unemployment rate (and near 20 percent “underemployment”⁵) to home foreclosures, mortgages in negative equity and 46.2 million Americans – one in six – with incomes below the official poverty line.⁶

Since President Obama took office in January 2009, the US unemployment rate has risen from 7.6 percent to 9.1 percent (by August 2011), the number of people out of work has grown from 11.6 million to 14 million, the national debt has soared from \$10.6 trillion to \$14.6 trillion, and the number of Americans without health insurance has increased to 49.9 million.⁷ Amid such a plethora of dismal economic indicators, both a double-dip recession and a “new normal” of high unemployment, falling incomes and long-term economic stagnation appeared a real and disturbing possibility for a United States unaccustomed to economic dystopia – the rudest of awakenings from the American Dream. So much, apparently, for the once potent promise of “Obamanomics” to spread the wealth and replace trickle-down economics with “bottom-up economic prosperity.”⁸

Over the same time-frame, the president's job approval ratings have fallen precipitously, from 65 percent after his first 100 days in office to an all-time low of 40 percent in opinion polls taken during the autumn of 2011.⁹ By then, no less than 43 percent of Americans strongly disapproved of the role Obama was performing as president,¹⁰ 62 percent disapproving of his handling of the economy¹¹ and 77 percent thinking that things generally in the US were moving in the wrong direction under his leadership.¹² Obama still has good reason for confidence that he can yet, Lazarus-like, triumph over his Republican Party opponent in 2012 despite such ominous economic indicators. But no US president with unemployment above 7.2 percent and job approval ratings as low as 40 percent has been re-elected since World War Two. What was once inconceivable a few short years previously is now eminently conceivable: Barack Obama as a one-term American president, his presidency assessed not as an historically “great” or “near-great” transformative one but instead an

ignominious and ineffective failure. Obama appears to be teetering on the precipice of an early retirement – denied his preference to be a great one-term president, rather than a mediocre two-term one; with a mediocre (or worse) one-term presidency becoming his premature political obituary.¹³

With the economy front and center for Americans, international affairs appear to be forcefully eclipsed as a major presidential election concern for 2012. Although an international crisis, war or “October Surprise” could yet re-focus voter attentions on foreign affairs, this seems improbable, given the breadth and depth of America’s economic malaise. Still, to the extent that they impinge positively on his re-election ambitions – even at the margins – Obama’s central foreign policy achievements strongly underscore his claims to have been a successful Commander-in-Chief: the killing of al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden; the final withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq; the overthrow of Libya’s Colonel Qaddafi without a single American casualty; the beginning of the end of the protracted campaign against al Qaeda in Afghanistan – America’s longest war; and the emphatic restoration of American prestige and respect around the world. After being handed a metaphorical shovel rather than a magic wand to dig America out of its various deep global holes in January 2009, Obama can seek re-election on the basis of having set out carefully defined international commitments that he mostly delivered – and having clearly passed what his one-time opponent, Hillary Clinton, famously dubbed the “3am test” of successful crisis management.

But, to survey the voluminous outpourings of US foreign policy observers over Obama’s leadership since 2009, one could be forgiven for believing that Obama’s foreign policy remains less a methodical, prudent and effective grand strategy for America than an on-going, *ad hoc* and tentative work in uncertain progress – not so much the audacity as the opacity of hope. In the commentariat sweepstakes to identify an “Obama Doctrine” to replace and repudiate that of his Republican predecessor – the much-dissected, misunderstood and mis-underestimated “Bush Doctrine” – no analyst has yet succeeded in attributing a definitive worldview to America’s forty-fourth president. While some on the American right continue to bitterly excoriate Obama as at best a weak, naive and feckless Commander-in-Chief, others on the left appear to exhibit a disheartened “buyer’s remorse” about a president whose once great appeal to enlist hope in order to effect transformative change (“yes we can”) instead seems to have foundered on the rocks of international resistance or – even worse – to have been cynically abandoned for the sake of short-term domestic electoral politics. After all, who now – beyond his immediate family and the president’s more light-headed partisan supporters – continues to herald Obama’s arrival in the White House as “the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal”?¹⁴

In relation to foreign affairs, the central question this book seeks to answer is whether such widespread expectations of transformation proved correct,

and why. To address this core question, three subsidiary themes are explored in the chapters that follow:

- i. What was/is Barack Obama's view of America's appropriate role and influence in the world?
- ii. To what extent has the president successfully implemented this strategic vision and, thereby, departed from the foreign policies of his immediate predecessor (and perhaps prior US presidents as well)?
- iii. How effective has Obama been in terms of securing the ultimate policy results that his strategy sought to achieve, and what best explains this?

The book's core argument is that the widespread expectations of transformative change associated with Obama's election have not been realized – despite the administration's best efforts to do so.

As the following pages contend, the divisions and dissensus about Obama that have marked his meteoric rise from community organizing in Chicago's South Side through the Illinois state legislature to the US Senate and the Oval Office are part and parcel of his unique historic achievement, distinctive personal character and particular political time as US president. Yet, arguably, although observers may differ sharply on the details, a reasonably clear framework to Obama's approach to international affairs is identifiable.

Obama's foreign policy can best be understood as adhering strongly to a "post-American" conception of world order – one in which American primacy is steadily but inexorably ebbing, with the US president's task being not to stem and reverse, but rather to gracefully manage, that obvious and inevitable decline. Contrary to those American conservatives who – inaccurately and sometimes irresponsibly – depict Obama as a dangerous, unpatriotic and even un-American radical, Obama's belief in a post-American approach stems not from some Third Worldist, socialist, or anti-colonial identity. Rather, it emerges from a careful and judicious – though not necessarily correct¹⁵ – assessment of America's commitments, resources and limits in an increasingly interdependent, networked and globalized international order.

In essence, Obama shares the influential analysis offered by Fareed Zakaria: that after the two major power shifts of the past 500 years – the rise of the West from the fifteenth century and the United States from the end of the nineteenth century – the "rise of the rest" represents the third great epochal change in the global distribution of power. The onset of once unimaginable economic growth, centered on but not confined to Asia, has given birth to a truly global order in which countries on every continent are now influential players in the international system, not just passive observers or objects. Combined with the diffusion of power from states to other, non-state actors, a new and

multi-layered international system is emerging that is quite unlike those of prior centuries. In such a system, while the US still remains for the time being the sole superpower, the distribution of global power – industrial, financial, educational, social, cultural – is steadily shifting away from American dominance into a *post-*, if not necessarily an *anti-*, American world; one “defined and directed from many places and by many people”:

Functions that were once controlled by governments are now shared with international bodies like the World Trade Organization and the European Union. Non-governmental groups are mushrooming every day on every issue in every country. Corporations and capital are moving from place to place, finding the best location in which to do business, rewarding some governments while punishing others. Terrorists like al Qaeda, drug cartels, insurgents, and militias of all kinds are finding space to operate within the nooks and crannies of the international system. Power is shifting away from nation-states, up, down, and sideways. In such an atmosphere, the traditional applications of national power, both economic and military, have become less effective.¹⁶

With the world inexorably returning to something akin to its condition at the end of the nineteenth century, where no single country or economy is predominant, how should the United States respond to this disconcerting new order and the rise of the rest? While it would be politically suicidal publicly to declare a foreign policy of American renewal premised on a core assumption of “managed decline,” as both presidential candidate and as president, Obama has sought consistently to alert Americans to the realities of a changing world order – while at the same time sustaining the notion that America can nonetheless maintain its leading position in that order. From his 2011 State of the Union speech declaring that, “This is our generation’s Sputnik moment,”¹⁷ to his address to a joint session of Congress on September 8, 2011 – “Building a world-class transportation system is part of what made us an economic superpower. And now we’re going to sit back and watch China build newer airports and faster railroads? At a time when millions of unemployed construction workers could build them right here in America?”¹⁸ – Obama has held America up to unflattering international comparisons in order to proclaim the continuing imperative of change.

While they may not represent irreconcilable impulses, squaring the circle of preserving Washington’s primacy in a post-American era – adapting to an international order in transition while renewing America’s leading role within that order – has been the abiding predicament of Obama’s foreign policy since January 2009. The watchwords of America’s emerging role and place within this shifting order – retrenchment, lowered ambitions, restraint, balance, prudence, patience – at once reflect and reinforce Obama’s post-American approach. Rather than merely reconfiguring the deckchairs, as “captain of a shrinking ship,” the president has instead attempted to perfect “the art of

declining politely” in order to navigate the American ship of state into less turbulent waters and narrower straits.¹⁹

But however reasonable the Obama diagnosis of a changing international order, the prescriptive elements informing his foreign and national security policies have proved highly problematic in achieving the ambitious goals that the president has set out to accomplish. Central to Obama’s approach to international affairs have been two particular tensions that the president has thus far been unable fully to resolve. The result has been that, much as his domestic presidency has encountered intense opposition and obstruction, so profound limits have circumscribed the Obama administration’s ability genuinely to exert effective, meaningful or sustained international leadership: strategically, to set a global agenda; and tactically, to persuade, cajole and coerce other actors into implementing that agenda.

The first tension, as Stanley Renshon anticipated, is between the international problems and foreign and national security policies that Obama inherited, on the one hand, and, on the other, the key premises of the president’s own worldview – a tension that ultimately cannot endure if Obama is fully (or even substantially) to succeed on the world stage.²⁰ On the one hand, while repeating the standard liberal internationalist mantra about shared interests, mutual respect and common humanity that have characterized mainstream Democrats for at least three decades, Obama has adopted not so much a quintessentially realist statecraft (in the international relations sense of “realism”) as an unrelentingly pragmatic, prudent and at times accommodationist approach to world affairs – one not so dissimilar, in important respects, to those of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and George H. W. Bush. Convinced that US power is ebbing, other states are embarked on an inevitable if uneven rise, and international goals must above all be sharply tailored to constrained national capacities, Obama has been doggedly intent on re-crafting America’s foreign policy for the “post-American” world.

That does not mean that the US under his leadership will cease providing global public goods, opposing tyranny or rejecting the use of military force. Nor does it entail the complete abandonment of idealism or “American values.” But it does entail their emphatic relegation to a secondary – even marginal – place. As a result, democracy promotion, human rights, and individual liberties (political and economic) have rarely received such muted public emphasis by a modern American president. Obama’s contemporary reformulation of John F. Kennedy’s famous 1961 inaugural address for our turbulent twenty-first-century times might declare that a cash-strapped America will only “pay part of the price, bear some of a modest burden, meet an occasional hardship, support the odd friend, oppose the odd foe” – not so much to assure the success of liberty in the world, but primarily to get the faltering foundations of America’s own collapsing house in order. The tension between adhering to an internationalist approach while attending closely to the national interests of

the US – especially in the context of his ambitious domestic agenda forming the political priority for Obama – has been acute and abiding.

The second tension derives from an important underlying assumption of the post-American approach; namely, that however much global relations are in flux, other countries – including other great powers on the rise – still anticipate, expect and demand American leadership of the international community. Obama's oft-touted means of achieving this has been an avowed grand strategy of "engagement." Since, in the president's view, globalization remains the key driver in international politics, the reality is that in an era of increasing interdependence, for both good and ill, even a strong America – let alone a frugal one maxed-out on its national credit card – cannot go it alone. Too many challenges that America is unable adequately to face and overcome on its own – from climate change to nuclear proliferation, pandemics to cyber-war, sovereign debt crises to people-trafficking – confront other states too.

Obama has therefore pursued a strategy of engagement that extends "respect" to civilizations, states and peoples alike, designed to replenish America's depleted stock of international capital and begin the process of realizing his vision of a more peaceful, stable and even, ultimately, a nuclear weapons-free world. Obama is, in terms of the American foreign policy tradition, an exemplarist, not a vindicationist.²¹ His particular version of American nationalism believes strongly in America leading by the force of example and exhortation, not that of intervention and imposition. By eschewing coercion and bellicosity for outreach and diplomacy, embracing the United Nations and international legalism instead of pursuing "coalitions of the willing" and power politics, emphasizing America's past culpabilities and present openness rather than uncritically celebrating its divinely ordained and righteous exceptionalism, Obama's Washington can exert the kind of consensus-oriented global leadership that will both reassure and cajole other states into cooperative action in a consortium of like-minded actors. Leading the changing international order still remains necessary, desirable and feasible for the US.

The sharp irony of the president's first term, however, is two-fold. Firstly, abroad, the basic premise of strategic engagement has simply been rejected out of hand by many of Washington's key interlocutors. America may "objectively" share multiple interests with China, Russia, India, Brazil, Turkey and many other nations in the abstract. But that convergence in practice has proved to be much more limited, selective and contingent than the Obama administration first imagined. America remains, for the time being, the most important military, diplomatic and economic power on the planet – the sole superpower – even as China's steep ascent advances rapidly on most dimensions of national power. But in a globalized world, where power is more widely diffused and dispersed not just to other states but also to peoples, the assumption of either the expectation or the demand for American leadership of the international community is now inherently problematic and widely questioned – not least

when the American president himself makes so forcefully clear his predominant focus on US domestic affairs.

If unmistakable signs of a waning of American leadership emerged strongly under George W. Bush, this became especially vivid during Obama's presidency. From the Copenhagen negotiations over climate change in December 2009 through Brazil and Turkey's interventions on Iran's nuclear program, from Islamabad's duplicitous "alliance" against terrorism through the largely autonomous Arab Spring of 2011 to Palestinian efforts to achieve statehood and on-going attempts to revive the ailing global economy through the G8 and G20, many nations and peoples were simply not looking to Washington any longer for leadership, influence or even advice. From being, as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once dubbed America, the "indispensable" – and even, to its critics, the inescapable – nation, the United States under Obama appears increasingly to resemble an irresolute, irrelevant and at times absent or invisible one.

Secondly, if Obama's transformative post-American "change" agenda has faltered abroad, so too has it encountered profound problems at home – ones with consequential foreign policy ramifications. Obama's post-American foreign policy has always been inherently linked to his transformative domestic goals. Not since Eisenhower has an American president so carefully and consistently linked the domestic and foreign aspects of his governing strategies. But, whatever the "post-partisan" rhetoric of candidate Obama in 2008, the president and his party – with the very active assistance of Republicans, movement conservatives and the Tea Party – have maintained, and in some respects deepened, a trend of intense partisan and ideological polarization in Washington that is now more than three decades old.²² By reforming health care, stimulating and seeking to engineer a "green" political economy, Obama has appeared to his outraged conservative opponents – and to many moderate and conservative leaning independents, too – as apparently intent on "normalizing" America by effecting a more European-style social welfare economy at home and a more passive, reactive and accommodationist stance in the world at large, at least where the most vital of US national interests are not at stake. With perverse timing, such transformation has also been advanced at precisely the moment when the euro-zone threatens to implode in the face of Greek, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian sovereign debt crises and the entire European Union "project" craters under the severest political, social and economic strains.

Yet America remains, if public opinion polls are to be believed, an essentially center-right nation.²³ Even if Americans are "operationally liberal" – in accepting extensive government intervention and regulations – they mostly remain philosophically conservative: individualist, anti-statist, anti-government, and anti-Washington. Moreover, most Americans continue to resist the notion that there is nothing especially distinctive – or even unique and superior – about their nation, its history, values and appropriate role in the world.

One result of this post-American approach is that “No Drama Obama” – a serenely detached and un-emotive president for whom the populist “common touch” has proven persistently elusive – has partially eroded the very domestic support that is critical to an effective foreign policy over the medium to long term. With the downgrading of America’s reliably pristine credit rating by Standard and Poor’s, from AAA to AA+, on August 5, 2011, a decidedly unwelcome “end of empire” moment appeared finally to have been realized under Obama’s post-American leadership.

The ultimate result of Obama’s presidency has thus been a peculiar twist on the Declaration of Independence’s pledge to evince a “decent respect to the opinions of mankind” (an historic term properly understood as endorsing US freedom of action, not – as is commonly thought – entailing its submission to prevailing international opinion). While the limits of his engagement strategy are very real and exacting, Obama’s post-American foreign policy has neither restored US confidence at home nor won the hearts and minds abroad that it sought. The irony is that, while calibrating his foreign policies to the emergence of a much heralded “post-American” world, the president has done a great deal in America and internationally to bring precisely that world about – simultaneously advancing its arrival while failing to preside over the renaissance of US global leadership that, “fired up and ready to go,” he consistently promised to deliver.

Hastening a post-American era, in which US power is seriously diminished, downgraded and declining, may not be the shining foreign policy epitaph that President Obama ultimately seeks for his administration. But it may well be the one that most aptly captures America’s current trajectory under his controversial stewardship, where America can no longer entirely fulfil its traditional global responsibilities but from which it cannot fully extricate itself. To paraphrase the famous quip about the United Kingdom’s downsized imperial status after World War Two, by Harry S. Truman’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson: while losing an “empire of liberty,” Barack Obama’s Washington has yet to discover a new world role.

Audacious no longer: from the fierce urgency of now to the timidity of “hope”

To the rapt attention and delight of much of America and most of the world, Barack Obama became the forty-fourth president of the United States on Tuesday, January 20, 2009. Rarely, however, has a modern American presidency so rapidly elated and disappointed in equal measure.

Although many of his fellow citizens entertained serious question marks over his beliefs, judgment and qualifications for the world’s most important office

during the 2008 presidential election, for most Americans – not to mention the overwhelming bulk of academics, citizens and the mainstream media in, and especially outside, the United States – the historic campaign demonstrated that Barack Obama's admirable temperament met in full the multiple criteria of Rudyard Kipling's ideal "man." After twenty months of intense campaigning, Obama – as *If* famously counselled – had waited and not been tired of waiting, had been lied about but not dealt in lies, and had talked with crowds and kept his virtue. If it was less clear that "all men count with you, but none too much" – that not only excluded women (a major source of voting support) but rather depended on which Electoral College state they occupied – the opinion polls from the collapse of Lehmann Brothers on September 15, 2008 onwards consistently predicted that "the Earth and everything that's in it" would soon be his: a final definitive test of whether a formidably gifted politician with an innate predisposition towards equanimity could, as President of the United States, treat those two imposters, Triumph and Disaster, the same.²⁴

But it was another, less admired Kipling poem – *The White Man's Burden* – that had the potential to prove more telling, ironic and problematic for the actual Obama presidency, especially with regard to American foreign policy. Belying his reputation as the unofficial Poet Laureate of the British Empire, and inspired by American intervention in the Philippines, Kipling's 1899 poem (sub-titled "The United States and the Philippine Islands") instead pleaded for the increasingly powerful United States to take up the so-called "white man's burden." Steadily but inexorably, from William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, through decisive interventions in World Wars One and Two and the intra-European civil wars that exhausted the dominant colonial powers, the US assumed the global leadership mantle that the United Kingdom reluctantly but inevitably abandoned. By 1961, Kennedy famously declared that the US under his leadership would indeed "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe" to ensure the success of liberty during the Cold War. But post-Cold War, post-9/11, and post-George W. Bush, the salient question on Barack Obama's entering the White House was whether he would take up his, and America's, Sisyphean international burden in turn, or instead – amidst myriad forces that were widely seen as hastening a post-American world²⁵ – seek to transform or even relinquish it. And in either case, would Obama's carefully constructed public identity help or hinder the execution of an effective and enduring leadership role for Washington, whatever the international constraints and burdensome costs?

As Obama asks the electorate for a second term as America's president, in what promises to be one of the most ideologically charged election campaigns in decades, those once heady days of "hope," "change" and "yes we can" optimism now seem very much an artefact of the past; less an expression of "the fierce urgency of now" than the rather empty promises of another era. Obama's historic victory in the 2008 presidential election was greeted at

least as enthusiastically outside as within the United States; much more so, in fact. With a few, albeit significant, exceptions, the peoples of most nations outside America were considerably more united in their approval and anticipation of Obama than Americans were themselves; 46 percent of whom – of those who cast a ballot – voted for the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain (R-AZ), amidst the deepest recession since the 1930s, the end of a much despised and divisive Republican presidency, a “culture of corruption” that surrounded the congressional Republicans and their favored lobbyists, and an international environment of multiple challenges to US power and global order on every continent.

After one of the most controversial periods in the history of American foreign policy under George W. Bush, the Obama administration was generally expected to be the antithesis to Bush’s thesis. Decisive and comprehensive changes for the better in the style, substance and results of US relations with the wider world were widely anticipated, for obvious reasons. In symbolism, not only had America seemingly confronted, at long last, its painful racial history in electing the first biracial president of both African and American descent. But the nation had also embraced a new phase of international leadership by a distinctive young progressive. Obama had spent his formative childhood years in Hawaii and Indonesia, and that pedigree facilitated his own self-definition as a “citizen of the world.”²⁶ Such an unusual style of American internationalism offered a cosmopolitanism that openly displayed familiarity with how peoples outside America disliked “our tireless promotion of American style capitalism and multinational corporations” and resented America’s “tolerance and occasional encouragement of tyranny, corruption and environmental degradation when it serves our interests.”²⁷ As one account put it:

Elected on a massive tide of discontent about America’s role in the world and its own sense of worth, occasioned by the travails of Bush’s global war on terror and horrific tales of systematic torture and kidnapping of terror suspects, held without charge, trial or the protections of the US constitution, Obama was the “new face” of American power, one that would steer America away from imperialistic hubris and war towards reconciliation, consultation and understanding: America under Obama would, once again, be a force for good in the world, and a power that would heal a divided society.²⁸

Obama, too, strongly appreciated his own role in symbolizing historic change. Nor was he lacking in self-confidence about the transformative qualities that he would bring to the national and international stage: “The day I’m inaugurated, the country looks at itself differently. And don’t underestimate that power. Don’t underestimate that transformation.”²⁹ Not only would America look at itself differently, but so too would the world. That self-confident prescience was subsequently confirmed by a series of opinion surveys during his first two years as president³⁰ and, even before the end of his presidency’s first year, the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace

(which, as Christopher Hitchens observed, was rather akin to “giving someone an Oscar in the hope that he would one day make a good motion picture.”³¹) Rarely has a change of American administration generated such broad excitement or comparably high expectations both within and, especially, outside the US.

But by the latter stages of Obama’s term, those stratospheric expectations had been effectively abandoned among widespread disillusionment about the authenticity of Obama’s much-touted audacity of hope, which increasingly appeared more timid than audacious. Enthusiasm suitably curbed, the excitement of November 2008 appeared both eons ago, rather than merely the last presidential election cycle, and an aberrant rather than a rational moment.

The inexorable pull of political gravity occurred partly because the international problems confronting President Obama appeared decidedly more intractable than malleable – especially with the US stretched both economically, by the Great Recession, and militarily, in the midst of two protracted post-9/11 wars: Afghanistan continues to offer little hope for a secure and Taliban-free future for its citizens; despite the welcome and long overdue demise of Osama Bin Laden – or more precisely, as illustrated by its alleged duplicity in harboring him – Pakistan continues to offer the greatest state threat to regional and wider security from the potential nexus of nuclear weapons, Islamist terrorism, and a failing state; from the strait of Hormuz in the Gulf to the strait of Malacca in South-east Asia, the global economy remains under threat from piracy and terrorism designed deliberately to “bleed the West”; Israeli-Palestinian relations remain framed by pessimism and fraught with difficulties and mistrust, their irresolution reflecting and reinforcing broader Muslim extremism and threatening a new *intifada* and regional conflagrations; an increasingly embattled and paranoid Tehran steadfastly rejects compromise on its nuclear program, intimidating its regional neighbors while undercutting attempts to shore up the UN’s creaking nuclear non-proliferation architecture; Russian-US relations remain less “reset” than in continual flux and mutual suspicion; rising powers China and India have been reluctant supporters of Washington; protectionist and nationalist pressures are on the increase from the European Union to China while trade liberalization faces major obstacles in Washington; Iraq’s tentative experiment in democracy remains fragile and its security in question as US troops depart, sectarian rivalries thrive, and Iranian influence increases; and the Arab Spring that promised finally to bring states from Tunisia to Syria into the modern world instead threatens to bring to power a series of hostile, anti-Israeli, anti-Western and Islamist-influenced regimes in place of once reliable if authoritarian US allies.

Such inhospitable turns of diplomatic and geo-political fortune have cast something of a pall on the once-confident expectations of “hope” that accompanied Obama to the White House. In place of optimism, by the fall of 2011, almost three-quarters of Americans (71 percent) disapproved of

Obama's handling of the economy while a bare majority of Americans (51 percent) disapproved of Obama's handling of foreign affairs.³² The heady American and international expectations of a new beginning for the US on the world stage, raised so extravagantly by the Obama campaign and abetted by an all-too-often credulous media, have for the most part been frustrated as Obama's foreign policy increasingly resembled an *ad hoc* exercise in damage limitation.

To be fair, admittedly, the president rapidly accomplished one important element in his ambitious foreign policy agenda virtually overnight: re-establishing much of the respect and international confidence in US leadership that was damaged, and some feared had been permanently eroded, during the Bush era. The Obama administration's approach, as executed by his widely respected team of foreign policy principals, was also welcomed as a return to the type of multilateral, consultative and pragmatically realist tradition that Bush's first term in office was generally perceived to have egregiously abandoned.

Yet, despite the new beginning and the symbolic penitence of the new administration's public diplomacy lending credence to Obama's election campaign promise of "hope," serious question marks remained in terms of policy substance and actual results. Substantively, the fiscal incontinence of the Bush years only intensified under the Obama administration, while signature elements of Obama's foreign policy reflected essential continuity with Bush rather than transformative change: more a not-so-subtle recalibration of the Bush Doctrine than an emphatic repudiation.

Moreover, in terms of concrete results, respected US foreign policy observers cautioned that, although it was too premature to declare the president an outright foreign policy "failure," Obama had – according to James Traub – "yet to bank a significant foreign policy success."³³ Other scholars graded him poorly, "O for 4 on the big ticket items that have defined his foreign policy agenda," according to Harvard's Stephen Walt.³⁴ While acknowledging Obama as an extraordinary communicator successfully altering international attitudes towards America, former national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft cautioned, "I'm still not sure, however, that he's the kind of chief executive that can take ideas, turn them into programs and initiatives, and then successfully execute and sell them."³⁵ A senior security advisor to the British prime minister, David Cameron – citing serious problems in Iran, Afghanistan, and Israel – even suggested that "There is a growing awareness that we are dealing with a weak American president who is failing to demonstrate effective leadership on a whole range of issues."³⁶

The Navy SEALs' daring assassination of Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May 2, 2011 silenced such negative evaluations for a time. But while heavy in symbolism, the killing of the al Qaeda leader did little to still the broader criticisms of an American administration that, in the infelicitous but strikingly resonant words of one Obama advisor, was dedicated to pursuing

a back-seat global leadership strategy of “leading from behind.”³⁷ Partly reflecting this rearguard approach, and notwithstanding Bin Laden’s death and Colonel Qaddafi’s toppling and demise, by the time of the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Obama’s foreign policy was castigated as nothing less than “a study in confusion,”³⁸ while the once-towering president was memorably dismissed by Jeffrey Sachs as the “incredibly shrinking leader.”³⁹

In the light of such unflatteringly Jimmy Carter-esque evaluations, some analytical modesty and circumspection are surely merited. After all, no definitive or conclusive judgment can confidently be delivered on an entire presidential foreign policy before its term is fully complete; writing history while history is unfolding is a notoriously difficult exercise in speculative judgment, presentism and short-termism. As Bin Laden’s death illustrated for Obama (albeit temporarily), volatile elements in the international system can unleash unexpected or momentous events, from Pearl Harbor and the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Iranian Revolution or the shock of 9/11. Unwitting or deliberate policy reversals and unanticipated innovations – such as the Nixon/Kissinger opening to China or the rapid victory in the first Gulf War for George H. W. Bush – can likewise reshape received evaluations overnight. “Rally-round-the-flag” events can bolster presidential credibility in foreign affairs (such as the Bay of Pigs) while “wag-the-dog” allegations can undermine it (think of Bill Clinton’s cruise missile attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan amid the Monica Lewinsky scandal of 1998).

Moreover, the hyper-partisan, media-frenzied and sharply polarized nature of contemporary US politics generally hampers dispassionate assessments of presidential leadership, even by supposedly neutral, disinterested or dispassionate observers. Few of us have ready access to the key inside players in the US administration, and those fortunate few who do are, precisely in virtue of that, not necessarily guaranteed to receive unbiased information and provide balanced accounts. On top of all these reasons for caution, a long-standing scholarly tradition now also features revisionist accounts of the contemporary conventional wisdom regarding presidencies in general, and their foreign policies in particular, drawing attention to the inevitable errors of commission and omission that accompany “in time” historical judgments. Taken together, these all augur for caution in judging US foreign policy.

If we should therefore be mindful of the limits to our knowledge of the design and implementation of US foreign policy, at the same time, such understandable and legitimate reservations have rarely impeded scholars from offering critical reviews at a relatively early stage – often ones highly negative in character (nowhere more so than in the case of Obama’s immediate predecessor, who attracted a remarkably large volume of antipathetic monographs in a very short time-frame). So it is important to be conscious that an interim assessment of Obama’s foreign policy is by necessity just that: a provisional judgment based on an incomplete and still unfolding history. Nonetheless, despite its relatively

early days, it is also important to attempt a balanced appraisal of Obama's strategic choices and achievements thus far, and their future prospects; even if it represents at best a first draft.

Contextualizing Obama

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the unique historic features of his candidacy, campaign and election – not to mention the left-of-center political leanings of most American and European social scientists – a voluminous and largely sympathetic literature has already arisen about Barack Obama: as an individual character;⁴⁰ as a campaigner;⁴¹ as president;⁴² and even as a pioneer “for any business seeking to prosper in the Web 2.0 world of the 21st century.”⁴³

Many of these works are immensely valuable, carefully reasoned, and contribute greatly to our understanding of the highly complex forty-fourth president of the United States – his ambitions, choices and the constraints on his leadership of the US at a time of profound domestic socio-economic upheaval, acrimonious political division and great international turmoil.⁴⁴ Some, it must be said, are less impressive, reflecting a glaring lack of critical balance, dispassion and even-handedness. A great deal of the literature is, inevitably, shaped by the sharp ideological and partisan leanings of the writers, not least those in the US. On the left, several books veer from uncritical adulation and virtual hero-worship to equally injudicious and sweeping condemnation.⁴⁵ On the right, hagiographies are not surprisingly absent in print, but a number of volumes venture comprehensive critiques that effectively cast Obama as some kind of cartoon presidential villain (the “Joker” of some Tea Party posters in 2009–12), apparently animated by an array of dark inner demons and dedicated to ruining America at home while reversing US influence abroad.⁴⁶ A more temperate assessment may, arguably, be a useful if modest addition to this literature, especially with regard to Obama's foreign policies.

For his supporters, the messages of “hope” and “change” that the Obama candidacy embodied as well as articulated together represented a powerful and overdue antidote to the two-term presidency of George W. Bush – as if an even more impressive real-life version of the *West Wing*'s President Jed Bartlet was finally riding to America's rescue with his own “Camelot” in retinue. Moreover, as his mobilization of the youth vote in 2008 indicated, Obama's election represented a generational changing of the guard on a par with Kennedy's in 1960; arguably more so, given the overt racial dimension. A relatively young candidate untainted by the divisions of the Vietnam era – who was only thirteen when the US withdrew its last military forces from Saigon in 1975 – could plausibly lead America beyond that era's pervasive culture wars, a task that had clearly eluded his two most immediate baby-boom-era predecessors in the White House. On a raft of domestic and international issues – from health care,

education, job creation and housing, through climate change, cap-and-trade, to homeland security, Afghanistan, Iran and Israel – the Obama campaign symbolized and promised a new progressivism for the twenty-first century that emphatically repudiated Bush's supposedly "compassionate" conservatism.

For Obama's most fearful opponents on the right, the Illinoisan represented an unprecedented threat to much that they cherished most about the United States, as not simply another run-of-the-mill centrist or southern Democrat in the mould of a Bill Clinton, but as a committed progressive seeking to radically change America's domestic structures and the US posture and influence in the wider world. Possessing solid partisan majorities in both houses of Congress after the 2008 elections, the potential for dramatic and decisive presidential leadership was powerful. For good and ill, then, widespread expectation existed from left to right in January 2009 that an "Obama Effect" would usher-in major changes in both America's domestic and foreign public policies.

And President Obama has undoubtedly sought – doggedly, shrewdly and sometimes subtly – to effect significant shifts in US public policies, tailored to a much altered, and still rapidly changing, international environment. In some respects, the president has been undeniably successful. At home, most notably, the passage during 2009–10 of the \$787 billion-plus budget stimulus, major health care overhaul and financial regulatory reform together represented substantial legislative achievements by the standard of any modern American presidency. The 2010 lame duck session of the 111th Congress – ratifying the New START arms control agreement with Russia, finally ending the "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards gays in the military, and extending the Bush-era tax cuts and unemployment relief – added further achievements to one of the most legislatively productive congressional sessions in modern US history.

Abroad, too, Obama initiated important changes in American foreign policies, from Afghanistan and Iran through non-proliferation and climate change to Russia. In terms of concrete achievements, most obviously, Obama effectively changed public perceptions of America and US leadership dramatically in large parts of the world, reviving the positive features of America's global image. The president's erudition and ease with the English language – "the armoury of the mind," as Samuel Taylor Coleridge once described it – at the teleprompter and in television interviews was the most striking personal contrast with his predecessor's frequent (mis)communication battles. But Obama's oft-repeated public commitment to renewed diplomacy, strategic engagement, multilateralism and mutual respect was likewise the echo and foundation of his principled counterpoint to Bush's belligerent, "bring it on" Texan swagger. Around the globe, Obama's analytical sharpness, articulate presentations and obvious ease with diversity in all its forms mitigated the legacy of his predecessor's "cowboy" image toxicity and, to some extent, moderated the global anti-Americanism that had experienced its own "surge" during the 2000s.

But that is only part of the story of Obama's presidency in foreign affairs and, in some ways, not remotely the most striking or consequential one. Whatever Obama's ambitious intentions, empathetic rhetoric about mutual interests, shared values and mutual respect, and dedication to serving as the "un-Bush" – self-consciously cerebral, erudite, informed, calm, cool, and cosmopolitan – the degree to which Obama as president achieved substantive changes in US foreign policies and international results has, thus far, been relatively modest. Leading from the rear rather than the foreground during an era of constrained internationalism, Obama's post-American foreign policy – tailored to the emergence of a more interdependent, complex and challenging international order – has instead exposed the profound limits of engagement as a strategy to enhance American interests, security and prosperity. Thus far, the execution of this approach – which often appears to comprise a default option of splitting the difference on issues from the Arab Spring to Mexico – has yielded only incremental results at best. Especially on some of the most pressing international problems and challenges – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, China, Israel-Palestine, and relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds – Obama's presidency has not seen a material improvement in the dilemmas facing the US and has instead, in some regards, witnessed a troubling deterioration for American interests, values and security alike. Such light as exists at the tunnel's end all too often appears the headlamp of the oncoming train.

Moreover, despite a (partial) return to an enhanced multilateralism, reinvigorated diplomacy and a diminished emphasis on the "freedom agenda," many of the deep structural problems that were so graphically highlighted during the polarizing Bush years – from the operational limits and skewed contributions of NATO's European partners compared to the US, through the reliably problematic operation and utility to international security of the United Nations, to the difficult relations with other great powers such as Russia and China and emergent regional powers such as Brazil and Turkey – remain at least equally so today. Obama's more or less consistent search for the pragmatic middle way in domestic and foreign affairs alike, though admirable in many ways, has cost him important political support at home and abroad, while failing to make decisive foreign policy gains or important breakthroughs. As such, while calibrating his foreign policies to the emergence of a much-heralded post-American world, the president has ironically done much to hasten the arrival of precisely that world, while simultaneously failing to preside over the renaissance of US global leadership and transformative change that his presidency consistently promised to achieve.

That does not mean that Americans – still less the rest of the world – are wistfully pining for the return of George W. Bush. But while few would gainsay the dramatic personal contrasts between the forty-third and forty-fourth American presidents in many if not most respects, on several key dimensions of foreign policy, after three years in office the attention-grabbing aspect

is less Obama's rejection of Bush-era principles and policies than the more general adherence – albeit that this continuity has often been forced upon the administration or been only reluctantly chosen. In ways that dismayed and even dejected his most ardent liberal enthusiasts, and which likewise surprised and pleased his most dedicated conservative critics, Obama has maintained, refined and, in some cases, aggressively expanded the central features of the post-9/11 Bush foreign policies – even while paying lip-service to contesting the central principles and values that informed their adoption. To the extent that this is the case, far from being a visionary, inspirational and transformative foreign policy presidency, Obama's has been muted, marginal and modest. That does not mean that such “change” as has occurred has been unimportant. But a combination of the heavy international constraints on Obama's room for international manoeuvre and some of his administration's strategic and tactical missteps have strongly limited the more ambitious dimensions that candidate Obama so confidently articulated for a new beginning and the securing of American renewal back in 2009.

Plan of the book

This, then, is the essence of the case set forth in the book: transformation has not happened on Obama's watch – at least, thus far. Making this argument clearly requires a detailed assessment of Obama's intentions, the transition to the presidency, and the evolving strategic and tactical approaches adopted by his administration in office as it was buffeted by dramatic events at home and abroad. The following chapters attempt to do this in a broadly sequential approach.

As a starting point, an important – and too often neglected – aspect of understanding Obama's foreign policies was what his initial approach actually comprised: the articulation of a post-American foreign policy better suited for a world in which US primacy was, on most if not all dimensions of power as classically understood, under challenge and eroding. In Chapter 2, by examining Obama as a candidate in the 2008 election – an election which, while it did not feature foreign policy prominently as a key voting issue for most Americans, nonetheless did see foreign policy contribute critically to Obama's confirmation as the Democratic Party candidate and also assist his ultimate victory over John McCain – the remarkable extent of interpretive division over Obama's approach to international affairs can be identified. Much of the disappointment about Obama, from supporters and critics alike, arguably stems from the many misperceptions that accompanied his election – or, more precisely, the extent to which the Obama campaign shrewdly allowed individuals to project onto their “human ink-blot” of a candidate whatever they wanted to perceive.

In Chapter 3, the attempts by the president and his key administration principals to mould a coherent foreign policy strategy aimed at American renewal – one conventionally termed “strategic engagement” – is appraised, along with the rapidly emergent conservative critique of its alleged flaws. In pursuing a prudent policy based on retrenchment and restraint, the nascent Obama Doctrine of “leading from behind” – while an unfortunate, singularly un-heroic and unusual conception of US leadership (one might as well term it “following from the front”) – was an entirely apt term for the type of modest post-American approach championed by Obama in office.

Having thus established the kind of changes Obama sought to achieve in foreign policy, the extent of his success can then be considered in the light of five specific case studies. While it would be beyond the scope of this book to attempt an examination of every foreign policy area, the central argument necessitates an appraisal of the key priorities that the Obama administration has had to confront over 2009–12: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the war on terror; Iran; Israel, the Palestinian territories and the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011; and great power relations with China and Russia. The book addresses these nation and region-specific challenges, rather than functional ones (such as non-proliferation, trade, and climate change) since these tend to be the focus for elite and mass attentions, while the functional issues tend to be subsumed under the rubric of bilateral or regional lenses and, notwithstanding the powerful forces unleashed by globalization, states (and, indeed, the lack of state capacity) remain in my view central to resolving many, if not most, transnational global threats. By not assessing Obama’s policies through a purely functional lens, it may be the case that the account given here is not as full as it might otherwise be, but focusing on the key challenges facing Obama seems a more manageable and preferable course.

As both a candidate and as president, Obama set far-reaching aspirations for a new beginning in US foreign policy, one that his supporters and critics alike, international allies and – to a lesser extent – US adversaries around the world took very seriously. Moreover, Obama’s analysis drew heavily on the notion that over 2001–09 George W. Bush had squandered US “soft power” – the ability to get others to admire and approve of you, and thence to follow your lead and/or agree with your goals – and that a key element in his foreign policy would be its steady recovery. A carefully calibrated marriage of hard and soft power resources (“smart power”), as recommended most prominently by Joseph Nye, was long overdue.⁴⁷ So, evaluating the extent and limits of change is intrinsic not only to gaining an accurate assessment of Obama’s foreign policy leadership; it also sheds a powerful analytic light on a theory that is widely subscribed to by academics but that, arguably, has relatively meagre empirical support. If a post-American foreign policy has indeed increased America’s soft power through changing global perceptions of the US, but without a commensurate gain in Washington’s actual political influence, the

implications for our understanding of international relations are at minimum worth exploring. It may, for example, raise the question of whether soft power really counts as power in any meaningful sense of the term, and whether there really exists any substantive meaning to the related term, “smart power.”

Rightly or wrongly, Obama set stratospherically high public and international expectations of a dramatic shift in American foreign policy during his campaign, one historic in its dimensions and potential impact – only then to try steadily to temper those expectations in his election night acceptance speech of 2008, the Inaugural Address of 2009, and the many subsequent speeches and television interviews that punctuated his term in the White House. Whether the man whose first biography was entitled *Dreams from My Father* could abide by Kipling’s sage advice, in office, to resist making dreams his master, looking too good or talking too wise, remained a very open question by 2012. But the heaviest burdens of his presidency – “waging savage wars of peace, filling full the mouth of Famine, to veil the threat of terror and bid the sickness cease” – remained a strategic necessity, not an optional extra, for the Obama administration. As this account attempts to show, Obama’s efforts to re-create the romantic poetry of his campaigning amid the mundane but vital prose of government have proven only fitfully successful. But given the likely constraints on a potential Obama second term – should he achieve re-election – the “attractions” of foreign policy may yet only increase to a president likely to be strongly hampered in domestic affairs. As such, it is worth reminding ourselves exactly what, as a candidate for the presidency, Obama sought to achieve in crafting a post-American foreign policy for a post-American world.