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The “Human Ink-Blot”: Obama, Foreign Policy and the 2008 Election

As a rooted cosmopolitan who has seen the US from the outside, Obama has the potential to renew US foreign policy for the Post-American Century.
—Carl Pedersen, *Obama’s America*¹

The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush’s father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan.
—Barack Obama, presidential election campaign event in Pennsylvania²

Not to dampen any parade, but if one asks if there is a single thing about Mr Obama’s Senate record, or state legislature record, or current program, that could possibly justify his claim to the presidency one gets ... what? Not much.
—Christopher Hitchens, “The Perils of Identity Politics,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2008³

Introduction

The received academic wisdom on the 2008 US presidential election described it, in John Kenneth White’s words, as “The Foreign Policy Election That Wasn’t.”⁴ In a collection of academic essays on the 2008 campaign, *The Year Of Obama: How Barack Obama Won the White House*, edited by the distinguished American political scientist Larry J. Sabato, foreign affairs barely merited even a passing mention, much less a separate chapter of its own.⁵ After three successive post-9/11 national elections – 2002, 2004 and 2006 – in which foreign policy figured prominently, with the on-going wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the wider war on terror dominating many voter concerns, international affairs proved to be the “dog that didn’t bark” in 2008. Eclipsed by the deepening recession from 2007, the financial shocks of September-October 2008 that saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average fall 6,000 points from its peak of 14,000 one year earlier, and a loss of more than

\$8 trillion in stock value in a matter of weeks, the 2008 election was – far more so even than that of 1992, a mild recession then also assisting the Democratic candidate for president – a question of “It’s the economy, stupid.” In a year during which all the key indicators reliably favored Obama for president, John McCain’s fate was decisively sealed by the collapse of Lehman Brothers bank and all the convulsions that then ensued in the Great Recession.

It would be foolish to directly contest this interpretation (although the scholarly consensus points to economic developments prior to the autumn, rather than the financial collapse, as being determinative in the election⁶). But this orthodox view nonetheless requires some modest qualification, for three reasons.

First, as a growing body of influential academic literature argues, the relationship between domestic politics and US foreign policy is far more important, complex and subtle than many analysts of American politics and foreign policy either acknowledge or appreciate.⁷ As Robert Saldin pointedly argues, “the elections literature is incomplete because it does not take foreign affairs seriously.”⁸ While much of the best political science is centered on voting behavior analyses, especially in the US, relatively little attention is generally devoted to the importance not just of international events, but also of public perceptions of the readiness of rival candidates to take up the unique burden of being Commander-in-Chief of the world’s sole superpower. As Kurt Campbell and Michael O’Hanlon argued compellingly in relation to the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore:

Advisers to Vice President Al Gore, referring to public-opinion polls, counselled their candidate to avoid the defense issue. In so doing, they failed to appreciate what seems a truism to us: that when Americans choose a president, even when the polls do not predict or reveal it, they *always* [authors’ emphasis] rate defense matters high. Even if Americans’ security does not seem imminently imperilled, they understand the special place of America in the world as well as the special national-security powers entrusted by the Constitution to the chief executive. They also look to discussion of defense issues, which have a certain gravity and concreteness, as a way to assess the character and steadfastness of any would-be commander in chief.⁹

Second, despite the obvious dominance of economic concerns in the campaign and presidential vote, foreign policy did matter in 2008 – albeit in more subtle ways than many analysts conventionally conceded. In particular, foreign policy was crucial to Barack Obama’s ultimately securing the Democratic Party nomination for president over the early frontrunner, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY); to his selection of Senator Joe Biden (D-DE) as his vice-presidential running mate; and also, in ironic ways, to effectively neutering traditional Republican advantages – and the obvious fact of Obama’s own inexperience – on questions of national security in the general election. While McCain still held an edge over Obama on certain key foreign policy

questions among American voters – most notably, dealing with the threat of terrorism – the proportion of voters who cast their ballot with international affairs as an important voting cue was modest. Critically, this was not simply a matter of the overwhelming salience of economic concerns, but also was a function of Obama's managing to convey sufficient strength on foreign affairs – despite the lightness of his resume and the political and media controversies over his relationships with William Ayers and Reverend Jeremiah Wright – that, even if he was without doubt untested, he could not plausibly be described to most US voters as "weak" on national security.

The third reason for qualifying the orthodox view of 2008 is perhaps even more subtle and extends far beyond the election itself. Obama's foreign policy platform, such as it was, not only helped to neutralize traditional Republican strengths on national security; more than this, it established a formidable set of expectations – in America and around the globe – as to what kind of innovative global leadership Obama would provide for a post-American world. Crucially, the Obama campaign deliberately raised public expectations extraordinarily – indeed, unrealistically – high. To take but one of multiple examples, Obama's peroration at St Paul, Minnesota after he had effectively won the Democratic nomination, memorably concluded:

Because if we are willing to work for it, and fight for it, and believe in it, then I am absolutely certain that, generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless ... this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal ... this was the moment when we ended a war, and secured our nation, and restored our image as the last, best hope on Earth. This was the moment, this was the time when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves and our highest ideals.¹⁰

Moreover, Obama's commitment to changing US foreign policy, and thereby altering the dynamics of international politics, exhibited a uniquely personal stamp. Aspirant presidential candidates inevitably promise much to their prospective voters. Who, after all, is rationally going to run on a platform of "elect me and nothing much will change"? But in Obama's case, the personalization was an inextricable and especially important aspect of his widespread appeal at home and, at least as significantly, abroad. As the Princeton historian, Sean Wilentz, later reflected, "There's something about a campaign that can lead to unreal expectations ... He had this among his supporters who, before he had even been sworn in, were already comparing him to Abe Lincoln and FDR. Some of his supporters thought he could transform the real world, but no one can transform the real world."¹¹

The significance of this was sometimes obscured by the historic symbolism of Obama's candidacy and the sheer novelty of some of the campaign's developments. For example, never before had a US presidential candidate – note,

not an incumbent president, nor a former president, but a then junior US senator and a neophyte aspirant to the office – addressed a mass gathering in a foreign nation's capital, as part of his own American election campaign: Obama's Berlin rally in June 2008 was entirely without precedent. Rarely in recent US history, moreover, had a candidate of either major party openly declared that he would meet with the leaders of noxious authoritarian US adversaries such as Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and Myanmar "without preconditions"; Obama's commitment to do so during the Democratic Party internal debates – though it earned him trenchant criticism – was striking and novel. Never had a US presidential candidate openly described himself not simply as a US citizen, but also as a proud "citizen of the world"; Obama's cosmopolitanism was simply unheard-of in an American campaign for the highest office in the land. In short, too myopic a focus on the 2008 election itself obscures the more lasting political significance of one of the most historic and unprecedented campaigns for president that any candidate has mounted across the entire sweep of American history. Part of the explanation for the widespread disappointment felt about Obama's tenure in office also stems directly from the transformative undertakings that Obama promised to pursue.

What is additionally significant here – and, once more, somewhat neglected in most academic accounts of the election – is that exactly what an Obama foreign policy would look like remained essentially in the eye of the beholder even through Election Day 2008 and the inauguration of 2009. To some extent, this was a familiar and even reassuring feature of US presidential campaigns of both major parties. Few policy specifics are generally given, concrete commitments are mostly to be avoided, and broad thematic and rhetorical devices invariably prove preferable to policy minutiae, extensive detail, and premature undertakings. The historical record of broken presidential foreign policy promises – from FDR and LBJ pledging not to send American "boys" to war, in 1940 and 1964 respectively, through Bill Clinton's 1992 refusal to "coddle" dictators "from Baghdad to Beijing," to George W. Bush's 2000 commitment to lead America as a "humble," not an arrogant, nation – generally augurs well for candidate caution on the campaign trail. But the markedly opaque nature of the Obama grand strategy was arguably, in part at least, a function of this particular candidate's unprecedented distinctiveness. That is, the nature of the campaign that Obama ran, first to secure his party's nomination and then to win the general election, reflected and reinforced the opacity of his ideas about America's future course in the world. And that, in turn, was partly an artefact of the very cosmopolitan character that he deliberately, fully and skilfully embodied.

Contrary to conventional academic and popular interpretations that typically, and rightly, regard race as a powerful hindrance to the political fortunes of a prospective black presidential candidate, Obama wore – or rather, subverted – the burden(s) of racial politics relatively lightly in 2008. As far as

foreign policy was concerned, especially, Obama's identity – or better, multiple overlapping identities – served as a perfect symbol for a newly cosmopolitan and transnational approach to America's evolving world role. Such an approach resonated powerfully with the knowledge class in the US and elsewhere. The approach can eschew specifics in favor of themes and generalities; claim multiple sources of inspiration; and tout on the basis of personally embodying diversity, rather than any particular set of concrete achievements or prior record of experience, a distinctive set of "qualifications" for political leadership: not just speaking for, but personifying, "change" (or, as one of his campaign slogans had it, "we are the change that we have been looking for"). This enticing appeal secured Obama substantial electoral support at home, and overwhelming political support and admiration abroad. As David Remnick noted:

There was also little doubt that one large non-voting constituency favored Obama: the rest of the world. In a poll conducted by the BBC World Service in twenty-two countries, respondents preferred Obama to McCain by a four-to-one margin. Nearly half the respondents said that if Obama became President it would "fundamentally change" their perception of the United States.¹²

But this also obscured the extent to which, as Obama's campaign quote at the start of this chapter suggested, the impetus towards transformative change amid the "fierce urgency of now" ran against powerful pressures to adopt a more pragmatic or conventional approach to foreign affairs.

"I've got a confusion on Obama": Cosmopolitan, Liberal Internationalist, Realist, Reaganite, Leftist?

During the early stages of his campaign for the White House, "Obamagirl" famously developed a crush on the candidate from Illinois; one that came to be shared by many millions worldwide. But to judge by the many competing interpretations of Obama's foreign policy stance, while some observers evinced not dissimilar attitudes, the commentariat as a whole was anything but in agreement. Depending on one's perspective, it was a measure of either the shrewdness or the shallowness of the Obama campaign that, even by the day of the 2008 election, opinion as to what an Obama foreign policy promised was so divided both within and between broadly progressive and conservative camps. This was not simply a matter of the inevitably heated partisan nature of the election and the more ideologically driven forces on both the left and the right, but more with regard to mainstream analysts and commentators. Confusion, or at least disagreement, was more notable than consensus.

For example, for some analysts, such as Fouad Ajami,¹³ the steady development of the Democrat's campaign increasingly suggested that Obama represented not only a decisive break from the George W. Bush years, but also "the sharpest break

yet with the national consensus over foreign policy after WWII.” Disaffected with American power and convinced of the utility of “soft power” – the ability to bend the world towards your view, through attraction rather than coercion – the Obama vision represented the embodiment of an elite liberalism which, in contrast with that of his erstwhile hero JFK and other Cold War hawks, had steadily become unmoored from traditional American nationalism and rejected entirely the notion that America was an exceptional nation-state:

This is not only a matter of Senator Obama’s own sensibility; the break with the consensus over American exceptionalism and America’s claims and burdens abroad is the choice of the activists and elites of the Democratic Party who propelled Mr. Obama’s rise.¹⁴

In heralding a “post-exceptionalist” foreign policy, Obama’s securing the nomination of his party over the early frontrunner (albeit very narrowly, and after a protracted campaign) represented, on this view, more than ever the victory of the left in American politics over traditional liberals. Whereas, in 1960, Kennedy and Nixon occupied a similar generational and cultural milieu, and hence differed more on tactics than fundamental strategy in the Cold War struggle against communism, Obama and McCain occupied markedly different generational and cultural space in 2008. As a result, the election represented far more a choice than an echo. It heralded not simply a different occupant of the White House but an approach to America’s place, role and influence in the world fundamentally at odds with all prior modern-era presidents, Democrat and Republican alike.

By contrast, rather than viewing Obama as a final victory for the left within the party, much foreign policy analysis – from the bulk of in-house journalists of the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* to *Time* and *Newsweek* and most pundits on CNN, ABC, NBC and CBS – accepted Obama as an emphatic return to a Bill Clinton-style liberal internationalism. The “radical,” “rational” or “militant” center found vindication of such an interpretation in the vituperative attacks on the senator from both the activist left and the conservative right. On this basis, the selective shots that Obama had to endure from the *Huffington Post* and the Dennis Kucinich/John Edwards/Mike Gravel wing of the Democratic Party – from voting to confirm Condi Rice as Bush’s Secretary of State in early 2005 to reversing position on immunity for telecommunications companies that assisted post-9/11 government eavesdropping on suspected terrorists in 2008 – testified to the senator’s instinctive centrism, pragmatism and temperamental coolness: even a small “c” conservative disposition.

Similarly, the depiction of the McCain campaign, most conservative columnists and the right-wing blogosphere of Obama as a soft-headed, liberal idealist who believed that “soft power” alone, deployed with sufficient charm and erudition, could face down the threats and remedy the ills of a dangerous world, reinforced the notion that Obama represented a post-Bush “return to normalcy.” Opposing “dumb” wars but not all wars, keeping all options on the table but being

unafraid to negotiate directly with enemies, being supportive of open market democracies but recognizing the flaws in free trade, Obama represented the type of fresh, un-ideological and intelligent centrist Democrat cognisant of global interdependence that candidate Bill Clinton had previously in 1992.

The originator of the "post-American world" notion, Fareed Zakaria, by contrast, claimed that in terms of the framework foreign policy ideas that Obama elaborated during his presidential campaign, "What emerges is a worldview far from that of a typical liberal, much closer to that of a traditional realist."¹⁵ The evidence for this? First, Obama was "strikingly honest" about his "inclinations and inspirations," not only repeating the Democratic foreign policy mantra of praising Harry S. Truman but also expressing "enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H. W. Bush." Second, Obama avoided moralistic speech, binary divisions, and a lack of complexity, viewing nations and sub-state actors as motivated as much by power, greed and fear as by ideology. Third, the Illinois senator "never" used soaring language like the "freedom agenda," preferring to speak of economic prospects, civil society and "dignity." Finally, Obama spoke admiringly of towering historic American foreign policy figures such as Dean Acheson, George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr. Acutely aware of the limits of both American idealism and American power, Zakaria concluded that "Obama seems – unusually for a modern-day Democrat – highly respectful of the realist tradition."

Still other Obama enthusiasts went even further. Eli Lake, for instance, dismissed conservative charges that Obama resembled a latter-day turbo-charged Jimmy Carter, instead suggesting that – at least in his approach to counter-terrorism – it would be Ronald Reagan's playbook on which he relied: eschewing a "one size fits all" approach to fighting terrorism, finding proxies to battle America's enemies, and aggressively seeking-out allies among the tribes co-mingling with terrorists while engaging and minimizing the corruption and brutality of local police and intelligence agencies.¹⁶

Such a view was of course anathema to many on the right, who viewed Obama's candidacy with a mixture of barely concealed fear and loathing. For many, Obama appeared a carefully calculated construction whose apparently moderate pedigree deceptively obscured a political trajectory typical of the far left. On this basis, from Obama's "exotic" personal journey through the associations with Reverend Wright and Ayers, to the community activism and Chicago machine politics, the senator's instincts were fundamentally far out of the mainstream of American politics. As the most notorious right-wing polemic put it, Obama possessed "at best only an intellectual understanding of foreign affairs," yielding a foreign policy that is "anti-war, anti-Israel":

Obama's foreign policy appears predicated on an overconfidence that the power of his personality and his willingness to negotiate will somehow transform international politics to the point where we can pursue nuclear weapons disarmament, reduce our military, and withdraw from Iraq without adverse consequences, even for Israel. Obama talks as if he can transcend international

politics-as-usual simply by employing some of the listening skills he learned in Saul Alinsky's radical community-organizing methodology.¹⁷

Cosmopolitan, liberal internationalist, realist, Reaganite, leftist? Was this division in opinion more a function of the divisions within American politics more broadly or did it reflect a genuine interpretive problem on the Obama approach to world affairs? And, if so, where did the "real Obama" lie on foreign policy for the post-Bush and post-American worlds?

The stealth candidate: symbolism as strategy (hope) and substance (change)

The most oft-touted explanation for uncertainty as to Obama's foreign policy beliefs, cited by both defenders and opponents alike, was the normal dynamics of American presidential election campaigns. On this view, the infamous Nixonian advice of moving towards the partisan extremes to placate the activist base during the nomination battle before rapidly refocusing on the center ground for moderates and Independents in the general election adequately, and fully, captured Obama's foreign policy "refinements" over 2007–08. Faced by a principal, and formidable, intra-party opponent in then Senator Hillary Clinton, Obama exploited what limited differences existed between them on the substantive issues to appeal to the base of the party. In particular, his opposition to the Iraq war, and his criticisms of NAFTA and free trade, sought to distinguish his candidacy from hers and to pit his better judgment against her greater experience. Having ultimately succeeded in squeaking to the nomination, Obama's logical course was to reassure centrist opinion, which began as soon as June 4, 2008 with his first presumptive nominee speech to AIPAC.

But a deeper explanation for the more opaque aspects of his outlook on the world can be found in Obama's carefully crafted public image and his strategic political ambition. As his two memoirs make clear, Obama not only has been deeply preoccupied by the nature of his multiple overlapping personal identities since his early years, but has also carefully calibrated the public projection of this in his political life. In campaigning for the Illinois US Senate seat in 2004, Obama framed his life as "part of the great American narrative of rising above challenges, even though Obama benefited from many upper middle-class institutions, such as private schools."¹⁸ He projected himself as "multicolored. He's everyone's candidate."¹⁹ Obama stressed not only that he was genuinely African American, tracing half his heritage directly to Africa, but also that he belonged to the "community of humanity." His struggle to define his community encompassed not just race but class and geography, with a half-Indonesian sister married to a Chinese Canadian. While rooted in the

African American community, Obama stressed that, "I'm not limited by it."²⁰ As such, his persona served as an effective surrogate for actual positions. As two Illinois observers put it, Obama is "the literal embodiment of our cultural hybridity" and represents "whatever you want him to be."²¹

Such a capacious flexibility can constitute a burden as much as a boon, according to Obama, since "everybody's projecting their own views onto you."²² But in fact, that opacity was something which, as one of only five African Americans ever to serve in the US Senate, and the first African American to mount a genuinely credible bid for the presidency, served Obama extremely well. As David Mendell put it in an early biography, in political terms, Obama "struck gold when it comes to race. Instead of being torn asunder trying to please each racial camp, he has strung a tightrope between the two and walked it with precision."²³ Moreover, Obama's calculated deployment of a trait that none of his African American predecessors shared, and which is applicable to very few American politicians even today, served partially to compensate for his slim resume and demonstrative lack of foreign policy experience or expertise. As Charles Krauthammer caustically observed:

For no presidential nominee in living memory had the gap between adulation and achievement been so great. Which is why McCain's Paris Hilton ads struck such a nerve. Obama's meteoric rise was based not on issues – there was not a dime's worth of difference between him and Hillary on issues – but on narrative, on eloquence, on charisma.²⁴

While Obama read and consulted widely on foreign policy as his presidential campaign progressed, and despite his much vaunted intellectualism, his familiarity with international affairs was limited and not especially distinctive. As Ryan Lizza recounted:

As a student during the Reagan years, Obama gravitated toward conventionally left-leaning positions. At Occidental, he demonstrated in favor of divesting from apartheid South Africa. At Columbia, he wrote a forgettable essay in *Sundial*, a campus publication, in favor of the nuclear-freeze movement. As a professor at the University of Chicago, he focussed on civil-rights law and race. And, as a candidate who emphasised his "story," Obama argued that what he lacked in experience with foreign affairs he made up for with foreign travel: four years in Indonesia as a boy, and trips to Pakistan, India, Kenya, and Europe during and after college.²⁵

That travel may well have broadened and even sharpened his mind. But, despite the efforts of some of his more enthusiastic supporters to parse it otherwise – Martin Dupuis and Keith Boeckelman claiming that the Illinois senator had "established strong credentials on foreign affairs, especially with respect to nuclear disarmament,"²⁶ and John Wilson even suggesting that, prefacing a one-page summary of the senator's foreign policy achievements in the national legislature, "Obama's experience in foreign affairs may be his

strongest attribute”²⁷ – Obama’s foreign policy credentials were markedly meagre in 2008. Although he gained a seat on the (for established US senators, increasingly unattractive) Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2005, his overriding focus was – understandably and entirely rationally – the domestic concerns of his Illinois constituents. Obama did travel to Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, including Israel and Iraq, during his first year in the Senate.²⁸ In 2006 he also travelled to Africa, to visit South Africa and his father’s homeland in Kenya, a prelude to the publication of *The Audacity of Hope* and, as even a sympathetic biographer noted, “much more successful as a major media hit than as a mission to imbue a first-term senator with greater knowledge about Africa.”²⁹

Compounding Obama’s lack of foreign policy experience was a lack of legislative productivity, achievement or novelty. Again, while his defenders exaggerated his senatorial success, even a cursory examination revealed the hollowness of such claims. Wilson’s one-page summary of his foreign policy record, for example, mentioned Obama writing a law signed in 2006 to provide \$52 million to help stabilize Congo, and penning an op-ed with Sam Brownback (R-KS) in the *Washington Post*. The signal other achievements were working with Richard Lugar (R-IN) to secure dangerous conventional weapons in the former Soviet Union, penning an “incisive” chapter on foreign policy in his second book, and convincing “global experts” such as Samantha Power and Susan Hill to work for him. In their less hagiographic tome, Dupuis and Boeckelman’s two-page review of Obama’s work on international affairs also cited his work with Lugar and his 2006 trip to Africa. The latter was also stressed in Mendell’s biography, where the senator symbolically took an HIV test in public and where his speech, “A Common Humanity Through Common Security,” stressed that AIDS, nuclear proliferation, terrorism and environmental degradation should bind rather divide people across the globe – although Obama, typically, “offered few specifics as to how that should occur.”³⁰

In terms of his substantive policy views, Obama’s senatorial record was one – unsurprising perhaps, as a junior senator with national ambitions – solidly in line with his party. He voted with his party 95 percent of the time in 2005, according to *Congressional Quarterly*, with just eight senators more consistently Democratic, and of his hundreds of votes he “agonized over a dozen or so.”³¹ According to *National Journal*, Obama’s votes were more liberal than 76 percent of all fellow senators on foreign policy, and more conservative than 15 percent. He was rated as the most liberal senator of all one hundred on the basis of his 2007–08 voting record by *National Journal*. As Christopher Hitchens argued, the reality of Obama’s foreign policy record, together with his inexperience of executive office, did not suggest a president bringing novel or transformative change to America’s engagement with the world, even if his speeches and persona did.

Commander-in-Chief/Cosmopolitan-in-Chief

It was difficult, though not impossible (Al Gore, after all, ran for the presidency in 1988 and John Edwards first ran in 2004, at the end of his first full term in the Senate), to imagine a white American politician running for the presidency on the same meagre basis as Obama's bid: community organizer, state legislator, and barely two years in the US Senate before formally announcing a presidential campaign on February 10, 2007. With minimal foreign policy experience, and an entirely conventional liberal voting record, to present a campaign as "the new face of American politics"³² also represented a truly audacious gambit. Its success relied on the deep unpopularity of the Bush years, the internal demographic battles of the Democratic Party's fractious base, and the ability of an exceptionally gifted, eloquent and distinctive candidate in Obama to connect with key elite officials, fundraisers and demographics – not least African Americans, the college educated, and the young – within the party.

In that respect, Obama almost certainly would not have won the party's nomination in 2008 without his unique position on the Iraq war. Among the leading candidates, only Obama was able to claim consistent opposition to the intervention. Clinton, Joe Biden, John Edwards, and Christopher Dodd had all voted for the Senate resolution to authorize the use of force in 2002, while Bill Richardson (then governor of New Mexico) had vocally supported it as well. By the time, in 2008, that almost no Democratic primary and caucus voters approved either of the war or of George W. Bush, only Obama was able to claim complete "purity." Not only did his good "judgment" thereby garner him early media attention, help his money-raising efforts and compensate for his lack of experience in foreign affairs – a key charge made against him by his opponents and, especially, Hillary Clinton – but he also made sure to note that he did not oppose all wars, only the "dumb" ones; crucial protection against subsequent Republican charges of softness on national security.

But in terms of specifics, the campaign's progression offered some more flesh on the relatively thin bones of Obama's foreign policy record. Drawing from his chapter in *The Audacity of Hope*, his *Foreign Affairs* campaign article of 2007, his campaign website, debate answers and public speeches, thirteen themes emerged as key templates of an emerging strategy to guide the US through a potentially treacherous post-American era:

- i. The war on terror, whether renamed or not, would continue, but with a more effective execution. Its central focus would return to Afghanistan, the real central front in the war on terrorism, and Obama would deploy two additional brigades (approximately 10,000 troops), made available by a 16-month draw-down from Iraq.
- ii. Obama supported proposals by Joe Biden on pressuring Pakistan by tying US military aid more closely to Pakistani anti-terrorist actions,

and to triple US non-military aid to Islamabad for education, health and infrastructure to \$1.5 billion per year. Obama reserved the right to order unilateral US strikes on Pakistani territory.

- iii. American combat forces would be substantially drawn down, though not necessarily entirely removed, from Iraq by the end of Obama's first term.
- iv. Direct negotiations would occur with "rogue states" such as Iran and Syria.
- v. Efforts to end US oil dependence would be stepped up as an urgent national security priority.
- vi. Reinvigorating the "peace process" between Israelis and Palestinians would be a presidential priority from "day one."
- vii. 92,000 additional Army and Marine Corps troops would be added to the Pentagon while the force structure was reassessed.
- viii. The US would recommit to the goal of ending not only nuclear proliferation, but also securing the reduction and ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons, as well as the prohibition of new types of nuclear weapons.
- ix. The US would amend NAFTA and use future trade agreements to raise labor and environmental standards.
- x. The US would seek a more level playing field on US-China trade relations.
- xi. Cap-and-trade proposals to cut US global warming pollution 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050 would be advanced.
- xii. Oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Reserve and new drilling on US coasts would be opposed. A windfall tax on multinational oil companies and tougher fuel economy standards on new cars and trucks would be imposed, to achieve a reduction of American oil use by 35 percent by 2030.
- xiii. The building of new nuclear reactors would be opposed until commercial nuclear waste can be disposed of safely, but the nuclear power option would be retained.

What these commitments amounted to in terms of gleaned any reliable sense of Obama's overall perspective on international relations remained rather unclear. For example, in *The Audacity of Hope*, he stated that, "We need a revised foreign policy framework that matches the boldness and scope of Truman's post-World War II policies – one that addresses both the challenges and the opportunities of a new millennium, one that guides our use of force

and expresses our deepest ideals and commitments.”³³ But in the next sentence he responded forcefully: “I don’t presume to have his grand strategy in my hip pocket.” What Obama did seem to reject was a mere set of traditional liberal goals, as might have befitted a Democratic candidate during prior decades. As he put it, the conventional objectives that liberals currently have – withdrawal from Iraq, stopping AIDS, working with our allies more closely – “have merit. But they hardly constitute a coherent national security policy” whereby “to make America more secure, we are going to have to help make the world more secure.”³⁴

Perhaps Zakaria’s claiming Obama for the realist mantle therefore held better sway? After all, while excoriating the George W. Bush administration’s “unilateralism,” Obama argued that acting multilaterally, which is “almost always” in the US strategic interest when it comes to using force, did not mean giving the UN Security Council a veto power over the US. Instead, it “means doing what George H. W. Bush and his team did in the first Gulf War – engaging in the hard diplomatic work of obtaining most of the world’s support for our actions, and making sure our actions serve to further recognized international norms.”³⁵ Yet, the administration having done all of that hard work, most Democrats in the Senate voted against authorizing force in the Gulf in 1991 – including Obama’s vice-presidential selection, Senator Joe Biden. What if the hard diplomatic work failed once more, as in 2002? Would Obama, like Biden later did in 2002, then endorse the “unilateral” deployment of US force?

Whether Obama – like Biden, Hillary, Tom Daschle and others – would have voted for the Iraq resolution had he actually been a sitting US senator in 2002 represented a “known unknown.” But as a sitting senator, Obama did emphatically oppose the 2006–07 “surge” in Iraq, favoring instead the “realist” prescriptions of the Baker-Hamilton Study Group: he voted to deny funds to that surge; he insisted on a rigid timetable for withdrawal of troops; and he denied the centrality of the surge to the stabilization of Iraq in 2008. Thus, on the key question on which he could vote as a sitting legislator, his much vaunted judgment proved faulty and, as *The Economist* put it, “both wrong and dangerous”³⁶ – the surge being the key initiative bringing Iraq to a position in which, ironically, the war had receded sufficiently as an election issue that both Obama and McCain could commit to troop drawdowns. Indeed, just as Obama’s opposition for the war sealed his advantage in gaining the nomination, so McCain’s steadfast support for it (and especially for the surge when, at a time of deep demoralization among Republicans, the Arizona senator repeated his refrain that he would “rather lose an election than lose a war”) was crucial to his obtaining the GOP candidacy.

But a similar predicament confronted Obama observers on other foreign policy issues. The strong campaign rhetoric that the senator deployed during the primaries and caucuses to tilt towards protectionism on trade he subsequently

dismissed in the summer of 2008 as “overheated.” Having argued for no preconditions for negotiations with Iran, he subsequently called for careful “preparations” before any such direct efforts. Having declared an undivided Jerusalem to be his position in his June 4, 2008 speech to AIPAC, his campaign retreated the next day to (re)state that the city’s status was always to be part of a negotiated settlement between the Israeli and Palestinian parties. Having opposed it previously, Obama voted in the summer of 2008 for legislation to grant immunity to those telecommunications companies that cooperated with the federal government on counter-terrorist monitoring in the aftermath of 9/11. In sum, whether one followed an inductive or deductive method to ascertain Obama’s core foreign policy philosophy, discerning where Obama stood on foreign policy specifics was a difficult enterprise.

Even in terms of his own party, the studied ambiguities, refinements of prior positions, and campaign emphasis on change together obscured rather than clarified where Obama’s approach was best identified. In the useful typology of Kurt Campbell and Michael O’Hanlon,³⁷ four types of foreign policy tendencies are identifiable within today’s Democratic Party: *hard power Democrats*, who view the flaw in the Bush Doctrine as its problematic execution, not its design; *globalists*, who focus on problems caused by globalization and broader definitions of security, and who are mostly uneasy with the use of military force; *modest power Democrats*, who would prefer America to retrench and refocus energies and treasure at home, regarding Bill Clinton-style Democrats as “Republican-lite;” and *global rejectionists*, comprising old-style leftists, labor unions and environmentalists, especially prevalent in the blogosphere and American academia. If one sought to place Obama within this particular typology, perhaps the only category from which one would confidently have excluded him was the last. But he could have fitted into the first three easily, and even the last – at least on the basis of his voting record – would have had something to commend it. “All and none of the above” was not an inappropriate assessment.

Some imprecision was perhaps inevitable. Ajami, pointing more to the personal story of Obama and the cultural milieu from which he emerged, put it thus:

Samuel Huntington, in *Who Are We?*, a controversial book that took up this delicate question of American identity, put forth three big conceptions of America: national, imperial and cosmopolitan. In the first, America remains America. In the second, America remakes the world. In the third, the world remakes America. Back and forth, America oscillated between the nationalist and imperial callings. The standoff between these two ideas now yields to the strength and the claims of cosmopolitanism. It is out of this new conception of America that the Obama phenomenon emerges.³⁸

Huntington’s three-fold framework essentially reflected a realist/nationalist, neo-conservative/liberal interventionist, and a cosmopolitan/transnationalist

trifecta. On the national model, America can neither become the world and remain America – the erstwhile cosmopolitan model; nor can it convert or impose “American values” abroad, however tempting the imperial impulse to do so has historically proven (the neo-conservative/interventionist model). But the cosmopolitan view, increasingly dominant in US universities, the mainstream media elites and among American judges and law professors, is one whereby the world in effect reshapes America:

America welcomes the world, its ideas, its goods, and, most importantly, its people. The ideal would be an open society with open borders, encouraging sub-national ethnic, racial, and cultural identities, dual citizenship, diasporas, and led by elites who increasingly identified with global institutions, norms, and rules rather than national ones. America should be multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural. Diversity is a prime if not the prime value. The more people who bring to America different languages, religions, and customs, the more American America becomes ... The activities of Americans would more and more be governed not by the federal and state governments, but by rules set by international authorities, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Court, customary international law, and global treaties and regimes.³⁹

In the hackneyed phrase, Americans should not act, as the late Richard Holbrooke described it, “with consistent disregard for what the Declaration of Independence called ‘a decent respect to the opinions of mankind’,”⁴⁰ – never mind that the actual meaning of the phrase was not about colonial Americans heeding foreigners’ advice, but showing them the respect of declaring “the causes which impel them to the separation.”

The dynamics and speeches of 2008 made it difficult, at that stage at least, to contest such an interpretation as being the most applicable to Obama’s basic worldview. Obama’s Berlin speech, while cultivated as much for Americans’ eyes at home as for the ears of Europeans, certainly evinced the quintessential “world citizen” mode. Indeed, the speech serves as a model of Obama’s cosmopolitanism – the quintessential product of “post-modern” multicultural politics. As Obama avowed in the speech, the West’s triumph in the Cold War proved that “there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one” (even though the world was, as tends to be the case in most wars, manifestly not as one). Much as Obama used his dual African and American heritages to appeal to an increasingly diverse black community in the United States during his campaigns for the state legislative and US Senate races – the product of immigration reform since the 1960s that has seen large-scale African and Caribbean immigration which has added to the community intra- as well as inter-racial tensions – to craft appeals as being rooted in but not limited by his identity, so the implicit message that Obama offered to the world was that he may be rooted in America, but he is not limited by that; unlike, most obviously, George W. Bush, Senator John McCain, and then Governor Sarah Palin. As Carl Pedersen suggested, Obama represented, much to their delight, a “rooted

cosmopolitan” holding out the hope of bringing about a “post-American” foreign policy:

A cosmopolitan American national identity actively promoted by a rooted cosmopolitan president will inevitably have an impact on notions of American exceptionalism that elide national differences in favour of an us-versus-them worldview ... Furthermore, cosmopolitanism can function as a bulwark against the cultural myopia that has plagued American foreign policy since 1898, by nurturing deep knowledge of other societies. Instead of seeing cosmopolitanism as a threat of disunion, Americans could regard it as an opportunity to become citizens of the world even as they maintain their allegiance to the US.⁴¹

Such an appeal carried obvious risks domestically, not least with the large swathes of America – small-town, provincial, nationalist, religious, gun owning, hunting – for whom the term “cosmopolitan” assuredly did not apply. Obama’s prevailing in the presidential race owed at least as much to the burdens of elitism, class, and gender that he needed to triumph over as that of race. But the general election campaign also featured two important factors that assisted Obama strongly. First was the dominance of the economy – the most important issue to 63 percent of voters, 53 percent of whom supported Obama on it, compared to just 44 percent for McCain. But, second, it is important to note that exit polls showed Iraq to be the second most important issue to voters (at 10 percent) and terrorism tied with health care for third (9 percent each). Those citing Iraq as the most important issue to them favored Obama by 59 percent to 39 percent, while McCain carried those most concerned about terrorism by the huge margin of 86 percent to 13 percent.⁴² The absence of another 9/11 terrorist attack on the homeland since 2001, and the relative stabilization of Iraq since the surge, had together muted the salience of foreign affairs to evaluations of the two nominees.

But the real burden of an approach that stressed the credentials of “Cosmopolitan-in-Chief” over Commander-in-Chief were always more likely to occur in office than on the campaign trail. Even with a Democratic House and Senate with large majorities, many of the “soft” security imperatives that Obama stressed need to be met – ending energy dependence, tackling the illegal narcotics trade and combating climate change – remained years, if not decades, away from significant reform, much less resolution. Convincing NATO allies to do more in Afghanistan was laudable, but quite how Obama proposed to succeed where Bush had failed was unclear. If the promised direct negotiations failed with Iran, as they did previously in more propitious times with the gifted diplomat Bill Clinton, what then? If a precipitate drawdown in Iraq plunged the nation back into instability, while failing to pacify Afghanistan or to meet the ever-growing security threats from Pakistan, how well would the rhetoric of “standing together” as one fare? And if Obama genuinely acted on his campaign promise to use military force within Pakistan if the US had actionable intelligence on al Qaeda and Islamabad refused so to do, what then of the attempt to reclaim America’s legitimacy and respect in the Muslim world?

Moreover, finally, with a Democratic Congress and undivided Democratic control of the federal government for the first time since 1993–4, the dangers that the elected institution least susceptible to protectionist pressures (the presidency) would succumb to those most susceptible (the Senate and, especially, the House) remained very real and dangerous. Obama's trade record was a microcosm of the lack of clarity – or, for his supporters, the pragmatism – in his foreign policy more broadly.⁴³ He had stated that expanding trade and breaking down barriers between nations benefited the US economy and security. But Obama publicly supported yet then voted against the Dominican Republic–Central America–US Free Trade Agreement in 2005, voted for the Oman Free Trade Agreement in 2006, opposed the free trade agreement with Colombia – a key US ally – in 2008, and supported the Peru Free Trade Agreement in 2007 (only subsequently to miss the Senate vote). Obama's U-turns on NAFTA renegotiation, scepticism about the Doha Round, support for proposals to strengthen the renminbi, and advocacy of tax credits for US companies that kept their headquarters in America and that increased their US labor force relative to their overseas workforce together belied his "cosmopolitan" credentials and powerfully suggested that international relations under an Obama administration – particularly one backed by large Democratic congressional majorities – would be anything but straightforward for allies abroad.

Conclusion

As the 2008 campaign developed, Obama gained ever greater national and international admiration and support, while simultaneously posing an increasing enigma to more critical observers. Despite the rhetorical brilliance, self-conscious intellectualism and strongly charismatic appeals, the most audacious decision Obama made in his entire public life was to run for the US presidency. By virtue of being unknown and distinctive, Obama not only articulated but also symbolized the change which democratic politics is deliberately designed to facilitate. As critics such as Gerard Baker put it, "It is indeed audacious to think that hope – and not much else – is sufficient to run a great country."⁴⁴ And despite his campaign's tactical brilliance, its overall strategy was consistently cautious and risk averse. The change that Obama called for remained, for the most part, as reliably opaque as his voting record had been reliably conventional and his bipartisanship reliably rare. As previously enthusiastic Arab leaders increasingly realized, the black progressive African American senator increasingly appeared an American first, a progressive second, and an African American third. Whether this was so by calculation or conviction – or a carefully calibrated combination of the two – was not fully clear.

But Obama's victory was not because he was a black politician nor even a politician who "happened to be black" – one who, in Shelby Steele's

formulation, was a “bargainer” rather than a “challenger” when it comes to dealing with the status quo.⁴⁵ Rather, it was because Obama embodied and exuded a cosmopolitanism whose symbolism overshadowed substance and was itself the story, the message, and – ultimately – the grand strategy. Obama’s strongest supporters regarded him as not just a “change agent” but also a “transformational figure” who, largely by dint of who he was, could repair America’s tarnished global image and bring closure, catharsis and redemption to the recent history of pain at home and abroad alike.

Obama’s election certainly represented an historic symbolic development for America that had an impact at home and around the world. But, contrary to the forecasts of his most ardent supporters, for whom Obama’s offer represented nothing less than “an end to US stupidity,”⁴⁶ there existed good reason to expect that in substance this would exacerbate, not ease, Obama’s time in his office. As Krauthammer noted by way of historical comparison:

The problem is that Obama began believing in his own magical powers – the chants, the swoons, the “we are the ones” self-infatuation. Like Ronald Reagan, he was leading a movement, but one entirely driven by personality. Reagan’s revolution was rooted in concrete political ideas (supply-side economics, welfare-state deregulation, national strength) that transcended one man. For Obama’s movement, the man *is* the transcendence.⁴⁷

As Kathleen Hall Jamieson later reflected on the Obama campaign: “There’s a tendency to overpromise and overestimate the power of the presidency. He made all those mistakes as a candidate. It helped him get elected. But it all but guaranteed he would fail to meet the expectations in his governance.”⁴⁸

Long before John McCain began stressing his admiration for “TR” during the 2008 campaign, Obama had characterized the Bush Doctrine as an extension of Theodore Roosevelt’s more expansive corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (“the notion that we could pre-emptively remove governments not to our liking”⁴⁹) from the Western hemisphere to span the entire globe. But the choice confronting Washington was, and remains, neither the starkly binary one of unilateralism versus multilateralism, realism versus idealism, nor war versus peace. Post-Bush, the next US president would confront a myriad of global challenges, a mix of reliable and unreliable allies, and a set of creaking institutions from the UN to NATO that, if not quite broken, were inadequate fully to meet the threats of a dangerous and changing world. President Obama, like all his predecessors since 1945, inherited an office at once of extraordinary power and extraordinary limitations. Priorities needed to be identified. Limited resources had to be deployed in a world of unlimited demands on American power. And a careful calibration of constraints as well as opportunities would necessarily condition American action with allies and against adversaries. How Obama sought to reconcile the harsh realities of office with the exuberant transformative hopes of his “change” campaign is the subject to which we turn next.