

# Obama: Demystifying Change in Foreign Policy

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President Barack Obama, former American senator and constitutional law professor, busied himself the past couple months amending America's sunken world image. Traveling abroad, Obama conveyed freedom and friendship to sovereign nations while renouncing George Bush's past unilateralist crusade; and back home, he reaffirmed his pledges for a new illustrious era of changes: transparency, accountability, return to the rule of law and the promise to restore the legitimacy of the Constitution.

The fireworks and hosannas had ended since his inauguration, but already within the several months of his official presidency Obama roused up some ruckus with the media that cried foul on the sudden reversal of promises. Columnists, bloggers, and civil watch groups had denounced his backpedaling on torture, wiretapping, and the sudden embrace of Bush-era shenanigans and secrecy. On July 1st of the New York Times, executive director Anthony D. Romero of the American Civil Liberties Union said that despite of the rhetoric, "there is no substantive break from the policies of the Bush administration."

Probed for some justification, the confronted Obama skillfully argues about shifting realities on the ground, or about looking towards the future and not the past. Despite the rhetorical finesse, many relented and challenged the implied defense of Bush's unconstitutional doctrines and the surrender of justice that was greatly overdue. On the other side of the veneer, Obama's faithful diehards still cooed, countering any criticism of the president's domestic and foreign policies with a fusillade. They charged that Obama was misunderstood, that the perceived missteps were merely a glowing part of his superb flexibility and competency.

Patience was preached for Americans to bear the status quo. If Obama continues the smooth rhetoric while strumming the goodwill of the public, it's likely that people would continue to praise him on flexibility, rather than beating around the bush.

There's much ado about Obama reversing course: it reveals a stunning betrayal of his original vision to end what Bush supposedly started, thus compelling everyone to speculate what changes he's really professing. The brilliant, cosmopolitan, and eloquent Obama may captivate audiences and unite opposing political forces; but rhetoric aside, he had set America for a different and unexpected kind of change.

## **Torture**

The planned January closing of Guantanamo Bay unveiled itself to be one of Obama's symbolic changes on ending torture. However, in a stunning show of defiance and mockery for the rule of law, Obama announced "constitutionally tweaked" military tribunals for Guantanamo prisoners. The scathing news drew fire and a royal lambasting from civil liberty

watchdogs and scholars, many who insisted that detainees should instead be swiftly tried in a legitimate federal court. In a statement by executive director Anthony D. Romero of the American Civil Liberties Union, despite these revamped tribunals, “the commissions system is inherently illegitimate, unconstitutional and incapable of delivering outcomes we can trust,” insisting that the whole system was designed to “ensure convictions, not achieve justice.”

The Obama administration was also drafting an executive order to employ “preventative detention,” a new system of imprisonment for terror suspects where the hard-to-charge and hard-to-convict would be whisked away to other detention centers and held indefinitely. What’s the incentive of shutting Guantanamo down if this administration opts for preventative detention? This farcical show of virtue with the prison closure is ruefully cosmetic than anything genuine.

Guantanamo became a brilliant symbolic ploy, a strategic cover allowing Obama to preserve other excruciating parts of Bush’s old terror policy like the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program and the denial of habeas corpus to combatants held in other prisons like Bagram, Afghanistan.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Obama released a statement on June 26 where he said that his administration was “committed to taking concrete actions against torture and to address the needs of its victims.” This grandiose statement of good intentions doesn’t absolve Obama from refusing to prosecute George W. Bush or Dick Cheney for allowing torture in the first place, nor does it absolve him of invoking the “states secrets” privilege to banish legitimate torture lawsuits against the government.

Obama also supported the suppression of newer detainee abuse photos on the basis that it would inflame anti-American sentiment, even though it is known that the growing number of civilian deaths by US Forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, had already triggered such sentiment within the local populaces. It’s likely these photographic revelations would prove that torture was a widely systematic operation involving the collusion of other higher ranking officials who wished to avoid prosecution. Obama would successfully shield them from their fates.

This torturous chronicle of theatrics fired up again on July 2nd when The Washington Post reported that the Obama administration continued to use tainted confessions obtained from torture to justify indefinite confinement. Mohammed Jawad, 17, was captured in December 2002 in Afghanistan as an enemy combatant. Since his capture as a juvenile at the age of 12, he had been whisked away to Guantanamo and subject to torture, beatings, and coercive interrogations for many years. According to The Public Record:

“The judge in Jawad’s military commission proceedings suppressed statements made by Jawad to Afghan and US officials following his arrest for allegedly throwing the grenade at US soldiers, concluding that [his confessions] were the product of torture and were made after Afghan authorities threatened to kill his family. However, the Obama administration, like the Bush administration, continues to rely on those same statements in arguing that Jawad should be held indefinitely.”

It’s no mystery why Obama desires to preserve and amplify parts of Bush’s terror policy

abroad in which his voters had entrusted him to vanquish: he still intends to fight the perpetual war on terror on a newer front: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## **The Middle East and South Asia**

Iraq's Sovereignty Day, conveniently marked alongside America's own Independence Day, was proclaimed on June 30th by the pro-US Iraq government to commemorate the American "troop withdrawal" and hand over control to Iraq's local forces. However doubts arose as Iraq experienced a violent backlash of bombings which continue to blight Iraq.

In an unsurprising turn of events, the purported withdrawal hyped by the US media was only a farce: US Troops were merely relocating and retiring to other military outposts outside of Iraq's major cities, not departing from the country entirely. According to McClatchy, Obama's plan would keep a force between 35000 to 50000 troops well after August 2010 to advise Iraq's local forces. US Forces are not primed to withdraw from Iraq until Dec 2011 according to the Status of Forces Agreement (SoFA), but even this date can be extended indefinitely.

The Obama promise of "ending the war" must've been a knee-slapping jest for neo-conservative war planners and think-tanks. The word "Sovereignty" is a euphemistic term for hand-holding and puppetry by its country's occupiers; just as a country being "pro-democratic" is a euphemism for any pro-Western satellite nation that is hopelessly subservient to its interlopers.

But there's much reason to believe that the US won't be retreating so soon even as the declared pullout date approaches. The US Had invested billions of dollars to build a complex military infrastructure here, including the largest embassy in the world that houses more than a thousand personnel to advise and influence every administrative aspect of Iraq. To dispel the myth of complete withdrawal, the July 9th Mother Jones highlights the incredible stake Washington holds here:

"Such a concentration of foreign officialdom in such a gigantic regional command center—and no downsizing or withdrawals are yet apparent there—certainly signals Washington's larger imperial design: to have sufficient administrative labor power on hand to ensure that American advisors remain significantly embedded in Iraqi political decision-making, in its military, and in the key ministries of its (oil-dominated) economy."

Because of US militaristic interventionism, the unstable, war-ravaged and ethnically splayed Iraq remains devoid of peace with more than a million Iraqis dead since the occupation.

As Obama plucked heartstrings and played on hopes to "end" the Iraq war, albeit differently, Obama had intensified operations in Pakistan's northern provinces, and surged the troop count in Afghanistan to almost 70000. In late June, a US Drone attack killed as many as 70 people in Waziristan, prompting Pakistan to call an end to the indiscriminate strikes. Cornering Pakistan in an uncomfortable position against its own people, Obama had been bombing the remote provinces of Pakistan since the first days of his presidency killing scores of innocent civilians.

The ultra-traditional Pashtun people residing in Waziristan, bracing themselves every night at the creeping prospect that they may be ripped apart by missile strikes the next day, are poignantly aware of the Pakistani government's complicity who command a joint offensive

operation that contributed to the deaths and displacement of their people. The civilian government also long denied its duplicity in the missile strikes, merging their voices with the afflicted as if to feign sympathy while they declare the attacks should be halted and Pakistan's sovereignty respected. Back in February 2009, the Predator drones were revealed to have originated from a secret US Base in Pakistan, confirming the deeper counter-terrorism and security symbiosis between the two nations. It's no wonder Pakistan desires to shy itself away from its American counterpart during the bad press.

The continued bombing and offensives in Waziristan primes an inescapable chain of events: as Jihadist charities and groups here continue to console the afflicted while fomenting anti-Western support, anti-American sentiment would engulf the region in a violent fervor, finally forcing angry Pashtuns to capitulate to an insurgency to repel the broader occupation. As they vow to extract vengeance, Pakistan is pitted into a state of peril; Pakistan becomes a parallel of Iraq where civil war arises and the rest of the nation is driven into political and economic instability. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal becomes endangered, and neo-conservative think-tanks and war sympathizers would finally flaunt this as a pretext to justify denuclearization, a plethora of troop escalations or even a full-scale invasion of Pakistan.

The myth about Pakistan "not being serious" about terrorism, thus justifying an American intervention, must be shamefully put to rest: the Talibanization and terrorism of these remote provinces is due solely to the American presence. Imran Khan, Pakistani opposition politician and leader of Movement of Justice, revealed on Democracy Now that the growing instability was a direct result of America's meddling in the region:

"...there was no terrorism in Pakistan, we had no suicide bombing in Pakistan, [until] Pakistan sent its troops under pressure from the US. General Musharraf capitulated under the pressure and sent Pakistani troops into the tribal area and Waziristan. So it was that that resulted in what was the new phenomenon: the Pakistani Taliban. We had no militant Taliban in Pakistan, until we got in—we were forced into this US war on terror by a military dictator, not by the people of Pakistan..."

### **The Real Meaning of Change**

Obama might've thought he'd be cut some slack from other foreign policy blunders: like supporting rose-revolution Georgia while mistakenly accusing Russia as the aggressor in the South Ossetia war, or failing to condemn Israel's disproportionate attacks on Gaza last winter that resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. However, coupled with his overall progress in Middle East foreign policy, all of this isn't a sign of incompetence or flexibility, but evidence that he intends to stay the course with the imperial war machine while deliberately crafting rhetoric to pretend otherwise.

Blaming Obama as just a cunning politician is only part of the grander picture. There's an existential significance on why such a smart and glowing man like Obama engages in a quiet tactical repackaging of all his political endeavors, especially in a time when America's image languishes at an all-time abysmal low. Anthony Arnove in an interview with Socialist Worker puts it into perspective:

"Essentially, during the Bush administration, whole sections of the left acted as if empire began with George W. Bush. As if it was something managed only by a handful of people: George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, sections of the neo-conservative movement, perhaps even the Republican Party more generally. That takes the events of the last eight

years out of the context of a history of US empire and aggression and intervention in global affairs going back to the 19th century. So in a sense, [Obama] does continue some of Bush's policies, minus unilateralism, but ultimately is preserving the neo-conservative foreign policy agenda."

That must be the meaning of change. The goal was not to restore the rule of law and constitutional legitimacy, but to transcend the Bush administration's cowboy unilateralism and tactfully reassert a neo-conservative normalcy in America's foreign policy. America unwittingly received a repackaged war program for those so hyperfocused on Bush-era crimes that they forgot these imperialistic dreams of American empire existed past the times of the Bushes. Obama coddled and kept his war hawk administration, continues the destabilization of Pakistan, and marches on with the broader war on terror.

It's no mystery why he continues the mimicry of due process yet engages preventative detention, the further suppression of abuse photos, and the denial of habeas corpus to foreign enemy combatants. The Iraq withdrawal facade and his funneling of troops and resources into Afghanistan and the Pakistani frontier, reveals that while preaching good intentions and a faux openness with the public, he still cannot escape the bipartisan war agenda.

Promises are lofty and bittersweet until voters realize that the two-party system is a dead construct with only counterfeit solutions. For Obama, change is just politics as usual.

**Bryann Alexandros** writes about politics, philosophy, and history. Some of his essays and commentaries have appeared in the *Center for Research on Globalization* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.

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