

Obama's Report Card

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Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, October 20, 2012

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The terrifying prospect of a Mitt Romney foreign policy has somehow obscured just how badly President Barack Obama has performed. When Obama took over as the self-proclaimed "leader of the free world" in January 2009 there was a war going on in Afghanistan, a lesser war continuing in Iraq, and smaller interventions in Yemen and Somalia. The global war on terror meant that there were also ongoing operations and military assistance programs in places like Colombia and the Philippines. Most of America's allies were under friendly though frequently despotic control, with the key exception of Pakistan, which was becoming dangerously unstable due to the George W. Bush administration's assertion of its own version of democracy promotion. Iran was the enemy du jour then as now with an alleged nuclear weapons program that somehow never actually produces a weapon. Obama, in his run for the presidency, had even criticized outgoing Bush for being soft on Iran. Relations with Russia and China were, if not friendly, at least non-confrontational.

So Obama did not have anything like a tabula rasa to build on, but he did have the option of going in a number of different directions. His early decision to begin calling the global war on terror by another name, overseas contingency operations, appeared to suggest that he understood that what had started out as a global crusade on phony principles was essentially both untenable and overblown for political reasons. A little toning down of the overly muscular description of what Washington had been doing was long overdue. Obama's Cairo speech, which also came early in his administration, suggested that there might also be a recalibration of relationships with the Muslim world. President Obama's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, hardly merited based on actual performance, was perhaps a suggestion that the world community hoped for a new United States minus its delusions of world dominance.

But then Obama discovered the hubris that comes as part and parcel of the presidency. Someone must have whispered in his ear and told him that America really could set standards for the remainder of the globe, or so it seemed. So let's see how he did on his foreign policy report card. The easiest grade is for Iraq. Obama wanted to retain a force of thousands of U.S. soldiers in the country after December 2009, but Baghdad refused to agree to a status of forces agreement that would have given the troops immunity from Iraqi law, allowing them to stay on. The Republicans have accused the White House of mismanaging the negotiations leading up to the departure, but it is now clear that the Iraqis wanted the U.S. to go and there was, in truth, no good reason to stay. The Iraqi government is increasingly autocratic, terrorism is surging, and Baghdad is now friendlier with Tehran than it is with Washington, all of which would have happened anyway. So Obama gets a "B" because he did, in fact, remove nearly all American soldiers from Iraq even though he wanted to do otherwise. The fact that Iraq was the greatest foreign policy disaster ever, trillions of dollars were wasted, and 5,000 U.S. soldiers died in a war fought on a lie that also

killed hundreds of thousand Iraqis is the fault of the Bush administration, not of Obama.

But then there is Afghanistan. Obama did a Bush by [surging](#) a force of 33,000 soldiers to defeat the Taliban in 2010. He had some short-term successes but failed to eliminate the enemy and is now trying to stitch together a political agreement that will save face and enable him to meet the end of 2014 self-imposed deadline for the removal of most American soldiers. Taliban leaders know he has to leave and are waiting him out. They are confident that they will again rule over Afghanistan in about three years' time. The Afghan adventure will cost the U.S. another cool trillion dollars plus and Obama has pledged to continue a high level of assistance even after the troops leave. Two thousand dead Americans and tens of thousands of dead Afghans later Afghanistan will return to the state it was in before 2001. There is a net gain in that the Taliban will not be so foolish as to allow a group like al-Qaeda to set up shop again inside its borders and invite massive U.S. retaliation, but that objective could have been attained in 2002. Obama gets an "F" for continuing the war and even increasing it when he could have cut his losses and gotten out. The end result will be the same either way, and all he did was add to the costs and death toll.

And then there is the war on terror, which includes Pakistan, the war's epicenter. Pakistan was in terrible shape in 2008, and its situation is, if anything, worse now, with a corrupt government that is also ineffectual and not respected by the Pakistani people. The Pakistanis have also been reviled and punished repeatedly by the United States for various perceived infractions, and their border region and tribal areas have become free-fire zones for Hellfire missiles fired from drones. Obama has [launched](#) 283 drone strikes in Pakistan alone, which is six times more than George W. Bush authorized in his eight years in office. This was a deliberate choice on the part of the administration to fight a war without making it look like a war is being fought. Obama believed, probably correctly, that no U.S. boots on the ground would mean no public perception that the U.S. is actually at war, but the damage to the relationship with a destabilized nuclear armed Islamabad has been severe and Pakistan is central to any political settlement to end the fighting in Afghanistan. The death of Osama bin Laden is a plus, though it's offset by the extralegal way in which he was killed. Overall, Obama gets another "F."

And then there is the rest of the war on terror. The U.S. is now more heavily involved with advisers in Yemen, has increased its drone strikes and spec ops directed against Somalia, and has advisers in Kenya, Mauritania, and Uganda. Drones have become the weapon of choice in all these conflicts, and their use has now extended to the U.S. border areas and police forces in the United States. One police force in Texas is [mounting](#) shotguns and grenade launchers on its drones. The war on terror, under its new name, has expanded even though the State Department's annual report confirms that there are fewer terrorists running around loose. But the few remaining terrorists have found new places to operate due to the chaos resulting after US interventions: Libya, Mali, and increasingly in Iraq. That certainly deserves an "F."

Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who might be a worse secretary than even Madeleine "it was worth it" Albright, have frequently criticized Russian internal politics. They have supported the efforts of U.S.-government-funded NGOs like the National Endowment for Democracy to teach Russians and other Eastern Europeans about how to behave like good Americans. They have done the same with the Arab Spring nations, leading the Egyptians and Russians among others to demand that the American advisers leave or face the consequences. Washington would not tolerate "foreign advisers" interfering in U.S.

national politics, and it is incomprehensible that the United States, which is rapidly becoming something like a national security state, can give advice on democracy to anyone. Russia has also responded to the criticism by [refusing to renew](#) Nunn-Lugar, which is one of the few good foreign policy initiatives engaged in by the U.S. Nunn-Lugar funds the dismantling of nuclear arsenals in the former states of the Soviet Union. Give Obama a “D.”

And then there is the world’s most dangerous nation, Iran, at least according to the U.S. media and Congress. Obama has avoided a war, and it appears that he is reluctant to give in to Israeli demands to start one, but he has not attempted in any serious way to negotiate with Tehran and come to a settlement of outstanding issues. Obama has had to bribe the Israelis into not attacking Iran, whereas George W. Bush had sufficient authority to order them not to do so, one of the few areas in which W. outshines his successor. Mitt Romney, meanwhile, has more-or-less promised to do whatever Benjamin Netanyahu wants, so he makes Obama look good. Obama gets a “C,” but if he wants to improve his grade he has to tell Israel to take a hike while admitting that Iran is really not much of a threat before sitting down and discussing Tehran’s nuclear program in an adult fashion.

And finally there are the wars of humanitarian intervention, which is a new category with this presidency, though it is a revival of what fellow Democrat Bill Clinton did in the Balkans. Obama has even [created](#) a new bit of govsppeak to conceal the reality of what he does: “kinetic humanitarian action.” Libya, the unnecessary war, which fortunately turned out to be cheaper and with less bloodshed than Iraq, was the test run of the concept. The foreign military intervention deposed a dictator but left behind a broken country with a dispersed arsenal that is showing up in places like Mali. And then there is Syria. The United States has no national interest that compels it to encourage regime change in Syria, which will certainly bring about a situation like that in Libya with the added potential for becoming much, much worse. Insistence on interfering in Syria has created something approaching a civil war and has also soured relations with Russia, which opposes intervention. The turmoil could easily spill over into Lebanon and Turkey is starting to panic now that it has foolishly opened Pandora’s box and supported the insurgents. Humanitarian intervention deserves an “F” plus double secret probation.

Obama’s grades are somewhat disappointing: a B, a C, a D, and four F’s. He will likely have trouble getting into a good college, and I recommend that he instead learn a useful skill such as basket weaving or pottery design.

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