

The Foreign Policy of an Obama Administration

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“Either man will abolish war, or war will abolish man.” [Bertrand Russell](#)

“In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt (March 4, 1933)

“I believe in a whole lot of things that make me progressive and put me squarely in the Democratic camp.” Sen. Barack Obama, (July 8, 2008)

President-elect [Barack Obama](#) is a nice guy and a fresh political face. His election on November 4 (2008), as president of the United States, is a great personal achievement. At the very least, he deserves the benefit of the doubt. Indeed, President-elect Obama has received from the American electorate an unequivocal public mandate for change. It is fair to say that his election creates an opportunity for the United States to tackle a number of systemic problems that have beset this proud nation for a long while.

The most important revision that could be made is the way Americans see their country in the world. Is the U.S. an old-style empire that uses empty phrases to advance imperialistic interests through military force? Or is the U.S. rather the first country truly founded on the [Enlightenment principles](#) of equality of all human beings, of individual freedom and responsibility, and of the democratic system of government, as embodied in the U.S. Constitution? Which is it going to be under an Obama administration?

Since [World War II](#), the United States has been obsessed with its military power. The fact that the U.S. played such a central role in defeating Nazi Germany and imperial Japan went to the head of most American politicians and of many American citizens. Suddenly, the U.S. saw itself as grander than nature, a messianic, self-appointed [“leader of the free world”](#). It was a mission that the [military-industrial complex](#) was eager to embrace with enthusiasm.

Towards the end of World War II, General Motors CEO Charles Wilson advanced the fateful idea of a [permanent war economy](#) with ever increasing military expenditures, and with military bases all around the world. On April 14, 1950, Wilson’s ideas were officially adopted by the U.S. government when [National Security Council Document 68](#) was issued by the Truman administration. It was the framework for an amoral and costly foreign policy that propelled the United States upon a dangerous path and which, nearly sixty years later, is threatening to push it toward financial and moral bankruptcy. Indeed, it is because of this far-reaching policy that the United States today spends more on the military than all the other nations of the world combined and has been willing, under George W. Bush, to engage in a war of aggression.

Even before, however, numerous foreign military adventures, beginning with the [Korean War](#) (1950–53), followed the adoption of this militaristic policy. The worst blunder was undoubtedly the ill-advised and gratuitous [Vietnam War](#) (1959–1975), in which some 55,000 young Americans and more than one million Vietnamese lost their lives, all for naught. It was also a major component of the [Cold War](#) with the Soviet Union.

The obsession with anything military turned tragic in the 1980s, under Ronald Reagan, when propagandists began to present the United States as the “good empire” as compared with other “evil empires”. Of course, the most grotesque rendering of this delusion reached its zenith under George W. Bush, when the United States perceived itself as being above international law, in its self-appointed “mission” or “crusade” to impose American-style democracy and promote U.S. economic interests around the world with tanks and bombs.

This transformation of a law-abiding American republic into a somewhat rogue [empire](#) above the law was bound to have many [dire consequences](#), for both itself and for the world.

In the past, the myth of a so-called U.S. [“Manifest Destiny”](#) under a divine authority, and of [American exceptionalism](#), has often surfaced in American history, but rarely as intensely as it was witnessed during the last quarter century. Used initially by the Jacksonian Democrats to justify the extermination of the Indians and the conquest of the American West, the myth was promoted by the Republicans in the 1980s to pave the way for the ideology of an American world hegemony.

As if to corroborate historian Arnold Toynbee’s 100 year cycle of imperial wars, the same myth had been used in the 1890s by members of the [Republican Party](#) to justify their seizure and occupation of former Spanish foreign colonies during the [Spanish-American War](#) of 1898. At that time, the United States embraced a policy of imperial conquests, with the occupation of the [Philippines](#), [Puerto Rico](#) and Panama.

Recently, the powerful [neo-conservative movement](#) adopted the same ideology of American moral superiority, presenting the policy of militarism and of imperialism as something “good”. The [neocons](#), indeed, have been the principal proponents of total global military domination by the United States. They have been the main driving force within the Bush-Cheney administration behind the American-led war of aggression against Iraq.

Soon, in January 2009, a new Obama administration will be inaugurated. Normally, if it really wants to change things, a new administration must spell out clearly its agenda during the first 100 days, before everything becomes “business as usual”. This is a moment to be seized and not be wasted, especially with the type of widespread mandate the incoming administration has received.

Will President Barack Obama deliver on his promise of change and adopt new and bold progressive policies? Indeed, will he have the wisdom and courage to revisit a more than half-century old foreign policy that has outlived its pertinence, and dare bring forward a new vision and a necessary change of direction? —At the very least, the question deserves to be raised.

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