

# Obama's Legacy

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As we approach the 100-day mark of the Donald Trump presidency, it is instructive to recall the almost 100 months during which Barack Obama discharged the responsibilities of that high office. While there are reasons to be concerned about President Trump (and reasons to be encouraged, such as the presence of individuals like National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster and Defense Secretary James Mattis), it is obviously far too soon to render judgment on Trump's foreign policy.

But it is not too soon to judge President Obama's. That judgment is increasingly hard to contest: The Obama years have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Severely wanting.

By the end of Obama's presidency, the U.S. standing in the world was weaker—clearly and appreciably weaker—than when he became president. The force of American power was diminished, and freedom was in retreat. By the end of Obama's presidency, was there a single part of the world where the United States was in a stronger position than when he took office? Was there an ally who was more confident or an adversary who was less so? By the end of Obama's presidency, were any important countries either friendlier or freer than they had been when he took over?

The answer to all these questions: no.

Let's push the argument a bit further. Let's compare Barack Obama with his predecessor. Whatever legitimate criticisms of George W. Bush's foreign policy one can make—and we made many contemporaneously and would still make many—let's be clear: Bush basically succeeded. Obama basically failed.

Bush's surge worked in Iraq, and it took Obama's withdrawal in 2011 to give away many of the gains. Obama's surge in Afghanistan also worked, but it was Obama himself who willfully frittered away those hard-won gains. Both Iraq and Afghanistan are in worse shape than they were eight years before.

What about Iraq's neighbor, Iran? Bush could have done more, but the situation only got worse under Obama. Bush at least began the construction of a pretty strict regime of international sanctions against the mullahs, a sanctions regime Obama threw away in 2015. Bush's much-decried commitment to a freedom agenda helped lay the groundwork for the attempted Green revolution in 2009—an uprising Obama pointedly refused to help.

Several bad actors began leading their nations in the wrong direction under Bush. But Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to name two, did more damage to their own countries, and abroad, under Obama. And once the Chinese leaders saw Obama's failure to enforce the red line against Syria in 2013, they went on the offensive in the South China Sea in a way that wouldn't have occurred to them under Bush.

As for Syria, what can one say? Obama's policy has been an unalloyed strategic, political, and moral disaster, with implications throughout the Middle East and beyond. Those implications include the migrant crisis in Europe—a continent in far worse shape strategically and politically than under Bush.

President Bush should have boosted defense spending more than he did. But President Obama left the military underfunded to the tune of \$100 billion a year, compared with the number his own defense secretary thought minimally acceptable. Bush actually made the case for various national security intelligence programs, and defended them vigorously. Obama didn't, and their support among the public and on the Hill is now more tenuous.

Then there is the unfinished business of both presidencies: the war on terror. Bush didn't pretend that the struggle against al Qaeda and its offshoots would be anything but a long, arduous war. Obama, once he had enjoyed his signal success with the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in 2011, spent the remaining five years of his presidency repeatedly misleading the American people with unwarranted happy talk about al Qaeda being "on the run" and unforgivably scoffing at ISIS as the "junior varsity."

Is this picture a bit overdrawn? Sure. But add all the details you like, and it wouldn't fundamentally change.

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Indeed the real question about the Obama legacy probably should be: Has America ever had a worse foreign policy president? We can't think of who that would be.

Looking back at the Obama years, we are reminded—as we so often are—of the words of Winston Churchill. Speaking in the House of Commons on March 24, 1938, he said:

*For five years I have talked to the House on these matters—not with very great success. I have watched this famous island descending incontinently, fecklessly, the stairway which leads to a dark gulf. It is a fine broad stairway at the beginning, but after a bit the carpet ends. A little further on there are only flagstones, and a little further on still these break beneath your feet.*

Thanks to Barack Obama, the flagstones today lie broken beneath our feet. Whatever judgment we'll eventually make on the Trump presidency, we should bear in mind the unenviable situation he inherited. And hope against hope that he rises to the occasion.

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