

Pragmatism or what?

The future of US foreign policy

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The 2012 US presidential election inverts the relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidates in 2008: Barack Obama is now tough and experienced, Mitt Romney a diplomatic neophyte. One of John McCain's more memorable assertions in 2008 was that he would 'follow Osama Bin Laden to the gates of hell'.¹ Obama's actions have spoken louder than McCain's hyperbole. On 2 May 2011, the President sanctioned a navy SEAL raid that killed Bin Laden in Pakistan. The boldness of this decision—in declining to inform Pakistan of US intentions and in using ground forces instead of launching an air strike—has largely armoured Obama against Republican attacks on his alleged lack of fortitude. So where can Romney land meaningful blows now?

Romney's main problem is that he is running against an incumbent who—through a step-change in the frequency, audacity and lethality of drone attacks—has waged war on Al-Qaeda arguably more effectively than his predecessor (and unarguably at a lower human and financial cost).² In this context, how does Romney communicate a greater desire to confront America's enemies without sounding like Barry Goldwater in 1964, whose belligerence was an electoral godsend to Lyndon Johnson. Romney is rarely less convincing than when seeking to out-hawk Obama on facing down Iran, Russia—'without question our number one geopolitical foe'—and China.³ Perhaps it is self-awareness that explains his discomfort in espousing such views: for Romney's working methods and operating principles closely resemble those of Obama.

Both men are results-driven and leery of ideology. Both believe that the extent of America's decline has been overstated. Both nonetheless recognize that the nation's resources are finite. And both appreciate that few crises are as straightforward as idealistic observers on both sides of the political spectrum would have them appear. In October 2011, Romney delivered a speech at the Citadel in Charleston,

¹ Ken Gude, 'John McCain versus Osama bin Laden', *Guardian*, 1 Aug. 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/01/johnmccain.usforeignpolicy>, accessed 18 July 2012.

² On Obama's strenuous counterterrorism efforts, see Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Bending history: Barack Obama's foreign policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), chs 3, 6. The negative unintended effects of drone attacks are discussed in Akbar Ahmed's forthcoming book *The thistle and the drone: how America's war on terror became a global war on tribal Islam* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

³ Interview with Mitt Romney, CNN, 26 March 2012, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1203/26/sitroom.01.html>, accessed 18 July 2012.

South Carolina that was widely reported for its bellicosity on Iran. During that same speech, however, he also made an important cautionary point: 'Our next President will face many difficult and complex foreign policy decisions. Few will be black and white.'⁴ Barack Obama could hardly dispute the wisdom of this remark. Time and again he voices a variation on the same theme.

This article will consider the intellectual sources of the candidates' foreign policies. It will examine both the pertinent experiences and mindsets of each, and the advisers employed to provide external stimuli to their thought and action. It is impossible to gauge the relative significance of these two sets of sources. In 2008, pundits (including this author) ruminated on the advisers likely to feature in the Obama administration and later drew conclusions as the composition of the Cabinet and the National Security Council (NSC) was announced.⁵ The balance then appeared poised between Wilsonian-inclined idealists such as Susan E. Rice, Samantha Power and Anne-Marie Slaughter, and supposedly more 'realist' thinkers such as Robert Gates, James Jones and Thomas Donilon. Yet focusing on the appointments obscured as much as it revealed. The President himself has dominated the foreign policy-making process in a manner redolent of John F. Kennedy. No Acheson, Dulles, Kissinger, Brzezinski or Shultz has emerged to take the diplomatic lead. The dominant foreign policy voice within the Obama administration is Barack Obama's. And that voice is steeped in the distinctly American philosophical tradition of pragmatism.

Thanks to his remarkable political contortions—geared to securing the Republican nomination, but a sight to behold nonetheless—Mitt Romney's foreign policy views are harder to pin down with certainty. This makes it tempting to assemble his diplomatic world-view through the lens of the advisory company he keeps, which includes the likes of Robert Kagan, Cofer Black, John Bolton, Aaron L. Friedberg and Eliot Cohen. This would be a mistake—just as it was with Obama in 2008. The entirety of Romney's career, including the manner in which he made his fortune, his role in rescuing from ignominy the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 2002, his governorship of Massachusetts and his failed bid for the Republican nomination in 2008, all provide important clues as to his likely foreign policy disposition.

In March 2012, Reverend Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention told the Romney campaign that it could win over 'recalcitrant conservatives' by 'previewing a few Cabinet selections: Santorum as attorney general, Gingrich as ambassador to the United Nations and John Bolton as secretary of state'. Writing in *The Nation*, Ari Berman observes ominously that this scenario 'is more plausible than you might think'.⁶ Really? There is little evidence from Romney's career to suggest that he would be so foolish. Romney won the governorship of Massachusetts because he knows where to find the centre. He sought out the

⁴ 'Mitt Romney delivers remarks on U.S. foreign policy', 7 Oct. 2011, <http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/10/mitt-romney-delivers-remarks-us-foreign-policy>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁵ See e.g. David Milne, 'Obama's foreign policy picks', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Nov. 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-milne7-2008nov07,0,2236272.story>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁶ Land quoted in Ari Berman, 'Mitt Romney's neocon war cabinet', *The Nation*, 2 May 2012.

median voter in both Republican primaries. The Tea Party ensured that this point was further to the right than at any time in his party's history. But the key point is that Romney is hardwired to operate in the middle ground of whatever constituency he is charged with persuading. If elevated to the national and international stage, this centrism is unlikely to evaporate suddenly as the likes of Bolton and Gingrich are given free rein. The main purpose of this dark hypothesis is to persuade Obama's left-leaning supporters to set aside their ennui and vote in fear of a trigger-happy alternative. It's a canny strategy that obscures the more complicated reality. Romney and Obama are in fact both results-oriented pragmatists whose similarities outweigh their differences. And this, of course, is a source of angst to the base of both parties.

The intellectual sources of Barack Obama's foreign policy

The obvious place to begin when considering Barack Obama's foreign policy views is his speech criticizing the move to war with Iraq in October 2002. The context of this speech is vitally important. He was speaking after Reverend Jesse Jackson at what was billed as an 'anti-war rally' in Chicago. In order of importance, Obama's purposes were, first, to distinguish his opposition from that of the Democratic left, and second, to attack the Bush administration for rushing into a 'dumb war'. His first sentence conveys as much: 'Let me begin by saying that although this has been billed as an antiwar rally, I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances.' Indeed, Obama devoted the next eight sentences of his speech to explaining why 'I don't oppose all wars'. What made the proposed war with Iraq so maladroit, in Obama's view, was its passionate, 'ideological' nature and its disregard for the apparent facts of the matter: 'that Saddam Hussein poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors ... and that in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history'. For Obama, launching a war against Saddam Hussein was '[a] dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics.' 'What I am opposed to,' said Obama, 'is the cynical attempt by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and other armchair, weekend warriors in the administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne.'⁷ The applause that met the speech was decidedly more muted than the reverie stoked by Reverend Jackson's more 'passionate' address.

It is interesting to compare the attributes valorized by Obama—'reason' and 'principle'—with those he impugns: 'passion', 'ideology' and 'politics'. It was a speech that revelled in cold, hard thinking informed by reason and evidence, one that decried the consequences of being led by instinctual absolutes. In *Reading Obama*, the intellectual historian James Kloppenberg hails the President as 'a man

⁷ For the full text of the speech, see <http://usliberals.about.com/od/extraordinaryspeeches/a/Obama2002War.htm>, accessed 18 July 2012. See also David Remnick, *The bridge: the life and rise of Barack Obama* (London: Picador, 2010), pp. 346–8.

of ideas', comparing him in cerebral quality to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The primary ideational source of Obama's political, social and diplomatic thought, Kloppenberg argues, is the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey.

Obama's speech attacking the dogma driving the Bush administration to war with Iraq certainly provides compelling evidence to support such claims. Obama abhors absolutism and is comfortable with pursuing policies that test and probe, reaping incremental progress, rather than those that seek to unveil or validate universal truths. The world is uncertain and constantly evolving. Framing policies informed by modesty and provisionality is the best way to avoid dangerous conflict. It is important here to compare this characterization of pragmatism with the more pejorative version of common usage, which emphasizes the realization of short-term gains through excessive compromise. Kloppenberg writes that 'Pragmatism is a philosophy for skeptics, a philosophy for those committed to democratic debate and the critical assessment of the results of political decisions, not for true believers convinced they know the right course of action in advance of inquiry and experimentation. Pragmatism stands for openmindedness and ongoing debate.'⁸ In March 2008, Obama's national security advisory team recommended that 'pragmatism over ideology' serve as his diplomatic lodestar. As Jo Becker and Scott Shane write in the *New York Times*, 'it was counsel that only reinforced the president's instincts'.⁹ Of course, the defining traits of pragmatism are almost comically out of step with the polarization of contemporary American politics. But Obama hews closely to them all the same.

The President approaches foreign policy on a case-by-case basis and purposefully, deliberately—rather too slowly at times—examines the merits or demerits of any given case. 'When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation,' Obama told NBC News in 2011, 'you're just going to get yourself into trouble.'¹⁰ This has been Obama's core method from his rise to political prominence through his presidency to date. Some observations—such as his promise to 'protect the American people and to expand opportunity for the next generation'—are taken from the bumper book of presidential boilerplate.¹¹ Others, such as his comment to voters in Pennsylvania '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' better captures his desire to engage with the world as it is, not as it should or might be—without geostrategic prejudice.¹² Yet realism, as James Lindsay observes, does not really

⁸ James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: dreams, hope, and the American political tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. xiii.

⁹ Jo Becker and Scott Shane, 'Secret Kill list proves a test of Obama's principles and will', *New York Times*, 26 May 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?page-wanted=2&hp>, accessed 18 July 2012.

¹⁰ Ryan Lizza, 'The consequentialist', *New Yorker*, 2 May 2011.

¹¹ Barack Obama, 'Renewing American leadership', *Foreign Affairs* 84: 2, July–Aug. 2007, p. 2.

¹² Quoted in James M. Lindsay, 'George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the future of US global leadership', *International Affairs* 87: 4, July 2011, p. 773.

capture his philosophical core: 'a more accurate description of how Obama viewed foreign policy was pragmatism rather than realism'.¹³

There is another reason why characterizing Obama as a realist is insufficient: the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr on his diplomatic world-view. In an interview with the *New York Times* journalist David Brooks, Obama praised Niebuhr for his 'compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate these things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction.'¹⁴ Niebuhr operated in the realist foreign policy tradition, but his devout Christianity tempered the amorality engendered by its purest application. As Andrew Preston observes in *Sword of the spirit, shield of faith*: 'Without religion, Niebuhr argued, realism would inevitably lead the nation astray because it would lack a moral compass and thus lack moral purpose, but without realism, religion could also be damaging because of its tendency to veer off into destructive, idealistic crusades.'¹⁵ Obama read and came to admire Niebuhr while teaching at the University of Chicago Law School. Niebuhr's critique of John Dewey—for failing to comprehend that self-interest drove humanity more than any other single force, and for being led by his worthy pacific tendencies to ignore the reality that the existence of evil meant some wars had to be fought to complete victory—struck a resonant chord with Obama.¹⁶ This was the central message of the President's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in Oslo in December 2009, in which he discussed, and rejected as inadequate, the Christian pacifism of Martin Luther King, Jr:

We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified ... I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms.¹⁷

Here, in a similar fashion to his speech in Chicago, Obama was challenging the preconceptions of the audience, distinguishing his foreign policy views from those of the conventional left. In both speeches two giants of American liberalism—respectively, Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King, Jr—are used as foils instead of models. Writing in the *New Yorker*, George Packer observed that 'the spirit of Niebuhr presided over the Nobel address. Neither idealist nor realist, Obama seemed to be saying that universal values and practical geopolitics exist in the same tension as war and peace.'¹⁸ It is in this amalgam of pragmatism and Niebuhrian realism that Obama's belief-system is most accurately situated.

¹³ Lindsay, 'George W. Bush, Barack Obama', p. 773.

¹⁴ David Brooks, 'Obama, gospel and verse', *New York Times*, 26 April 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html?_r=1&ref=reinholdniebuhr, accessed 18 July 2012.

¹⁵ Andrew Preston, *Sword of the spirit, shield of faith: religion in American war and diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012), p. 611.

¹⁶ Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, p. 121.

¹⁷ Quoted in Preston, *Sword of the spirit*, p. 612.

¹⁸ George Packer, 'Peace and war', http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2009/12/21/091221taco_talk_packer, *New Yorker*, 21 Dec. 2009, accessed 18 July 2012.

In such circumstances, self-identified Wilsonians have found themselves in a challenging environment. Samantha Power, a close adviser to Obama when he was a candidate, has struggled to exert influence from her marginal post as Senior Director of Multilateral Affairs at the NSC. This seemed to change last year during the debate on the merits of military intervention in Libya, when some pundits observed that Power had returned to the fore in making a forceful case for intervention.¹⁹ There is some truth to these observations—but only relatively speaking. The manner of the intervention bears all of Obama's incremental decision-making hallmarks. And most observers ascribe a more significant role to David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy in persuading Obama to enter the fray.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, a self-described 'humanitarian hawk' and devotee of Woodrow Wilson, certainly found it difficult to make her voice heard in the Obama administration. After resigning from her position as chair of the Policy Planning Council in February 2011, Slaughter complained that the 'world of low politics, "soft power", human rights, democracy, and development' was being marginalized. That women tended to concentrate on such issues—while realist-inclined men such as Robert Gates and Thomas Donilon operated instead in what they viewed as the more significant realm of nation-states and hard power—was a significant problem: 'One of the best parts of my time here has been the opportunity to work with so many amazing and talented women—truly extraordinary people. But Washington still has a ways to go before their voices are fully heard and respected.'²⁰ Slaughter despaired of Obama's equivocation on the Libyan intervention, observing pointedly: 'You can't be a little bit realist and a little bit democratic when deciding whether to stop a massacre.'²¹ A supporter of the 2003 Iraq War, Slaughter became yet more hawkish in February 2012 when she argued in a *New York Times* op-ed that 'foreign military intervention in Syria offers the best hope for curtailing a long, bloody and destabilizing war'.²²

Of course, one of Slaughter's major disappointments—which she tactfully did not mention—was that the woman who hired her, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, sided with Obama and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates on virtually every major issue that crossed her desk. Clinton is no Wilsonian idealist; instead, she has supported the President's cautious diplomacy with unstinting loyalty. Indeed, her alliance with Gates has been a source of great stability and reassurance to Obama, allowing him to set the foreign policy direction that best suits his ideational core without needing to worry about dissent from the big hitters in the Cabinet. 'I'm not sure if he considers this an insult or a compliment,' Obama told the veteran journalist Bob Woodward in reference to Robert Gates, 'but he and I actually think a lot alike, in broad terms.'²³ Having a like-minded Secretary of State and Defense Secretary in post has neutralized a problem that presidents often face:

¹⁹ Tom Hayden, 'Samantha Power goes to war', *The Nation*, 30 March 2011, <http://www.thenation.com/article/159570/samantha-power-goes-war>, accessed 18 July 2012.

²⁰ Hayden, 'Samantha Power goes to war'.

²¹ Lizza, 'The consequentialist'.

²² Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'How to halt the butchery in Syria', *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/24/opinion/how-to-halt-the-butchery-in-syria.html>, accessed 18 July 2012.

²³ Bob Woodward, *Obama's wars: the inside story* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 290.

major egos at odds on policy against the constant and destabilizing backdrop of empire-building on the part of the Pentagon and (less frequently and successfully) State Department. If Obama defeats Romney in November 2012, it is difficult to imagine the President appointing a successor to Hillary Clinton whose views diverge much from his own. Barack Obama's dominance is likely to continue.

'Pragmatism plus Niebuhr' in practice

Writing in the *Weekly Standard* in July 2009, Matthew Continetti described Obama's foreign policy as the 'good Niebuhr policy'—a pun on Franklin Roosevelt's 'good neighbor policy' towards Latin America. Of course, Continetti invokes Niebuhr to shame Obama rather than praise him. He castigates what he views as Obama's shamefully passive response to the improprieties of the Iranian election of 12 June that returned President Ahmadinejad to power with an implausible 63 per cent of the vote. As demonstrations spread across Iran, Obama declined to lend any vocal or material support to the discontented—who clearly had right on their side—doing little beyond what he described as 'bearing witness'. Continetti found Obama's response to the thwarted revolution in Iran both morally bankrupt and strategically inept:

The realists' lackadaisical attitude in the face of democratic fervor is partly a consequence of their view that a regime's character is largely irrelevant to its foreign policy. It is partly confirmation that Obama's team is more interested in restricting the scope of American ideals, interests, and ambitions than in capitalizing on moments when history might shift decisively in our favor. But, taken as a whole, such a mindset isn't 'realistic'. It's obtuse.²⁴

Obama's caution in the face of momentous events in the Middle East has remained constant through his presidency to date. Each proto-revolution has been met with trepidation—for shifts in power in that region are messy and unsettling, and can have major economic repercussions—followed by cautious rhetorical support, followed by a strong statement that the leader in question should listen to the people and depart with all due haste, followed by deliberation on the best way to effect such change without committing substantial US resources. 'Leading from behind' is how one anonymous White House aide self-destructively though accurately described Obama's policy towards Libya.²⁵ This method was certainly applied with respect to the revolutions in Egypt and Libya, though not with respect to demonstrations in Bahrain, where respecting the wishes of that country's powerful, oil-rich neighbour Saudi Arabia far outweighed concerns about the divisive and repressive leadership practised by the minority Sunni Al Khalifa royal family in this majority Shi'i nation. *In fine*, Obama's response to the 'Arab Spring' has been defined by his determination to react on a case-by-case basis

²⁴ Matthew Continetti, 'A good Niebuhr policy', *Weekly Standard* 14: 40, 13 July 2009, <http://staging.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/692zjhne.asp?page=2>, accessed May 26, 2012.

²⁵ John Rogin, 'Who really said Obama was "leading from behind"?', *Foreign Policy/The Cable*, 27 Oct. 2011, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/10/27/who_really_said_obama_was_leading_from_behind, accessed 18 July 2012.

and not to allow 'ideology' to influence the decision-making process. All is finely calibrated, little is instinctual.

An important aspect of Obama's diplomacy is that he is at home with the complexities of practising diplomacy in a world in which power is increasingly diffuse. The President has elevated the significance of the G20 *vis-à-vis* the G8. This was done not just to anticipate global power shifts before they became fully realized, but to give the rising powers of the developing world a greater stake in what he describes as the management of the 'global commons'—issues such as trade, development, climate change, nuclear proliferation that transcend the ken and capacities of the individual nation-states and that necessarily must be tackled collectively.²⁶ Along these lines, Obama has made a concerted effort to accord greater respect to America's export earnings-gorged creditor China, and to allay that nation's sensitivities regarding its place at the top table. He has also devoted closer attention to India than his predecessor, calling for its admission to the UN Security Council as a permanent member.

If the Old World feels slighted by some of these decisions, then it simply has to absorb the blow to its prestige, adapt to reduced circumstances and focus on its own economic rehabilitation. As Indyk and his colleagues write, 'if the United States would have to accept a diminished role as "first among equals" so too would Europe have to adjust by making room for the emerging powers to take their seats at the table, whether it be in the G-20, the International Monetary Fund, or an eventually enlarged Security Council'.²⁷ Europe's relative economic decline is far more pronounced than that of the United States. The multilateral apparatus of today was crafted in the mid-twentieth century and is truly showing its age. Reading the runes and acting accordingly is the closest we have to an Obama doctrine.

In the main, Obama has pursued a cautious, reactive foreign policy. But there has been one major exception to this rule: the President's strong position on the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the diminishing circumstances under which he might order their use. In Prague on 5 April 2009, Obama vowed to 'put an end to Cold War thinking' and to 'reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy and urge others to do the same'. Most dramatically, echoing Ronald Reagan during his second term, Obama vowed 'to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons'. In April 2010, President Obama's 'nuclear posture review' added substance to these aspirations. Most significantly, the document announced that 'the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations'.²⁸

At face value, this is hardly the most radical of steps: if you renounce a weapon that we possess in abundance, we promise not to destroy you with it—unless

²⁶ See Indyk et al., *Bending history*, pp. 13–14.

²⁷ Indyk et al., *Bending history*, p. 14.

²⁸ See Michael S. Gerson, 'No first use: the next step for US foreign policy', *International Security* 35: 2, Fall 2010, p. 7.

provoked. But the change is more significant than scholars like Michael S. Gerson allow. It is historically unprecedented for a pre-eminent nation to forswear the use—even in part—of its most powerful weapon. Obama's stance is primarily a moral one, and it is to his credit that he has taken the lead at the height of his power rather than afterwards. Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz all came round to the inescapable logic of nuclear disarmament late in their careers, after their influence had largely been spent.²⁹ It is significant that Obama announced his intentions during the first hundred days: at the zenith of his power. There remains a distance yet to go, however, if the President is to realize the visionary and ambitious goal he set the world at Prague. While Gerson is excessively downbeat in observing that 'the NPR's new declaratory policy is little more than calculated ambiguity by another name', he is absolutely correct to note the huge gulf between Obama's ultimate goal and the reality as it stands.

In many ways Obama is still bathing in the glory of the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. It is the defining moment of his presidency to date, and its impact on the public consciousness should not be underestimated. It is likely to prove a significant weapon for the incumbent in the forthcoming presidential debates. Elsewhere, Obama has subscribed to pragmatic principles in his response to upheavals in the Arab world and in the manner of his escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Bob Woodward's *Obama's wars* provides strong testament to both the President's caution and his decisiveness in rejecting military advice he viewed as deficient on the basis of cost–benefit analysis. The President may be expected to manage the de-escalation with similar focus and hard-headedness. On Iran, finally, Obama tried engagement, received no encouraging response, and so has imposed strong sanctions and kept all options firmly on the table regarding Tehran's nuclear, and wider strategic, ambitions.³⁰ As David E. Sanger wrote recently in the *New York Times*: 'The economic sanctions Mr. Obama has imposed have been far more crippling to the Iranian economy than anything President Bush did.'³¹

When Obama assumed the presidency, he told an adviser: 'I'm inheriting a world that could blow up any minute in half a dozen ways, and I will have some powerful but limited and perhaps even dubious tools to keep it from happening.'³² Little has changed over four years to soften this assessment. But it is clear that the President has displayed little queasiness in applying these 'dubious tools' and has shown a remarkably firm foreign policy hand—particularly when one considers the epithets McCain and Palin threw at him in 2008 regarding his naivety and weakness. Criticizing Obama's record presents Mitt Romney with a formidable challenge.

²⁹ See McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara and Gerard Smith, 'Nuclear weapons and the Atlantic alliance', *Foreign Affairs* 60: 4, Spring 1982, pp. 753–68; Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William J. Perry and George P. Shultz, 'Toward a nuclear-free world', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 Jan. 2008.

³⁰ See Trita Parsi, *A single roll of the dice: Obama's diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

³¹ David E. Sanger, 'Is there a Romney Doctrine?', *New York Times Sunday Review*, 12 May 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/sunday-review/is-there-a-romney-doctrine.html?pagewanted=1>, accessed 18 July 2012.

³² Woodward, *Obama's wars*, p. 11.

The sources of Mitt Romney's hypothetical foreign policy

Unlike Richard Nixon or John F. Kennedy, Mitt Romney has spent little time gathering foreign policy experience—or indeed reading or writing much on the subject—prior to running for president. He spent 30 months as a Mormon missionary in France, which taught him something about resilience. As he recalled in 2002, ‘it’s quite an experience to go to Bordeaux and say, “Give up your wine! I’ve got a great religion for you.”’³³ (Had Romney known how politically disadvantageous in America it was to speak French, he might never have gone.) After returning from France he studied English at Brigham Young University in Utah, graduating with the highest honours in 1971. From there he moved to Harvard, where he gained a joint JD/MBA from the law and business schools. The programme was highly intensive and selective, its 15 students representing something of an elite within an elite. As Romney’s biographers Michael Kranish and Scott Helman write: ‘Academically, the law school was more theoretical, the business school more practical. Harvard Law ... relied largely on textbooks and instruction. The business school revolved around the case study method, in which students dissected real life business decisions to learn to think like managers and executives.’³⁴ Romney performed well on both strands, though slightly better on business. Of course, Barack Obama also studied at Harvard Law School, where he developed a deep interest in jurisprudence and constitutional law, becoming the first African American editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. Romney’s and Obama’s experiences of Harvard were thus quite different. Obama sought out the ideas best suited to alleviating poverty and injustice; Romney located efficiency methods and the best means to secure competitive advantage. Obama left Harvard for a career in academia and grassroots politics, Romney for management consulting and private equity.

Romney’s successful and lucrative career at Bain and Company is a major source of contention between the candidates in the domestic sphere. It provides few clues as to his foreign policy views beyond the obvious one: that Romney has an eye for opportunity, is ruthless when implementing a plan, and is adept at immersing himself in the detail of whatever problem he is charged with solving. These skills were certainly brought to bear in 1999 when he was appointed president and CEO of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games of 2002. Romney is widely credited with rescuing a fiasco in the making. He attracted corporate sponsorship and lobbied Congress with aplomb. He also addressed and disarmed the fears of local critics, ensuring that Salt Lake City came out of the experience with a high-quality infrastructural legacy. It is tempting to infer from this experience that Romney might prove a dab hand at managing both alliances and bilateral relationships.

Though he works hard to shield or obscure his actual record from the angry glare of his party’s right wing, Romney’s gubernatorial record in Massachusetts

³³ Katha Pollitt, review of *The real Romney* by Michael Kranish and Scott Helman, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/apr/18/the-real-romney-review>, *Guardian*, 18 April 2012, accessed 18 July 2012.

³⁴ Michael Kranish and Scott Helman, *The real Romney* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), p. 92.

provides the most interesting clues to his potential approach to foreign policy. After all, the world Romney would like to lead more closely resembles pluralist Massachusetts than a bloc of Republican primary voters. His landmark achievement in Massachusetts, a health care bill making it mandatory for citizens of that state to possess health insurance, is testament to all Romney's talents as an analyst and pragmatic deal-maker. At the lavish signing ceremony in Faneuil Hall on 12 April 2006, Senator Edward Kennedy joined Romney on stage. The two men exchanged jokes and warm words, the latter observing prophetically that 'this is an achievement for all the people of our commonwealth and perhaps for the rest of America, too'.³⁵ Romney had earlier remarked that 'there really wasn't Republican or Democrat in this. People ask me if this is conservative or liberal, and my answer is yes. It's liberal in the sense that we're getting our citizens health insurance. It's conservative in that we're not getting a government takeover.'³⁶ Again, Romney's hardwired centrism—his unerring focus on the achievement of results irrespective of 'ideology'—was amply on display. There is little here to suggest that Romney's foreign policy will follow the ideologically driven objectives of George W. Bush.

Parsing Romney's career is certainly a useful exercise in identifying clues to his diplomatic tastes, but what of the written record? As Romney was a governor, not a senator—he failed in his attempt to unseat Ted Kennedy in 1994—the paper trail is thin. As a serious presidential candidate in 2007, he was commissioned to write a foreign policy thought-piece for *Foreign Affairs*. The purpose of the article—which carried the anodyne title 'Rising to a new generation of global challenges'—was to mollify and reassure in a polarized political environment. In it, he staked out little new ground, instead identifying points of agreement among realists and neo-conservatives, a classic piece of Romneyan triangulation. Throughout the article Romney sets himself up as the grown-up in the room: 'More broadly, lines have been drawn between those labeled "realists" and those labeled "neoconservatives." Yet these terms mean little when even the most committed neoconservative recognizes that any successful policy must be grounded in reality and even the most hardened realist admits that much of the United States' power and influence stems from its values and ideals.' Romney went on to observe that America was in need of 'an overarching strategy that can unite the United States and its allies', but cautioned that this should be formed 'not around a particular political camp or foreign policy school but around a shared understanding of how to meet a new generation of challenges'.³⁷ Again, Romney's emphasis is on achieving results, not on pursuing agendas. The method deployed in addressing any given foreign policy challenge should vary depending on its nature.

Beyond the 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article there is his campaign website, of course, although there is little there that is revelatory. Its summation of the Romney foreign policy approach is vapid: 'The unifying thread of his national security strategy is American strength. When America is strong, the world is safer. It is

³⁵ Kranish and Helman, *The real Romney*, p. 277.

³⁶ David Corn, 'Mitt Romney: how long can he steer clear of GOP craziness?', <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2011/03/08/romney-how-long-can-he-steer-clear-of-gop-craziness/>, accessed 18 July 2012.

³⁷ Mitt Romney, 'Rising to a new generation of global challenges', *Foreign Affairs* 86: 4, July–Aug. 2007.

only American power—conceived in the broadest terms—that can provide the foundation for an international system that ensures the security and prosperity of the United States and our friends and allies.³⁸

Romney's speech at the Citadel in October 2011 had more substance; indeed, it was his most important foreign policy speech to date. Its primary goal was to characterize Barack Obama as defeatist and out of tune with American values—in more or less the same way that Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson and Ronald Reagan lambasted Henry Kissinger in the 1970s. So Romney stated: 'I believe we are an exceptional country with a unique destiny and role in the world. Not exceptional, as Obama has derisively said, in the way that the British think Great Britain is exceptional or the Greeks think Greece is exceptional. In Barack Obama's profoundly mistaken view there is nothing exceptional about the United States.'³⁹ The important difference between then and now is that, notwithstanding his excessive regard for nuance, Barack Obama is not in fact a narrow Spenglerian-influenced realist, consumed by doubts about the ability of Americans—and democracies at large—to comprehend geopolitical subtleties and act accordingly. Obama is as devoted to realizing 'another American century' as Romney. More importantly, little in his résumé suggests that Romney is a neo-conservative in the making. Romney is pursuing a bellicose strategy *vis-à-vis* Obama's alleged passivity because he believes it will resonate with voters—not because it comes from within.

The Romney brains trust

That Obama is no Kissinger was revealed in a meeting the President held with news anchors just prior to his 2012 State of the Union address, when he devoted a full ten minutes to complimenting Robert Kagan's recently published essay in *The New Republic*, 'Not fade away: the myth of American decline'. The President cited Kagan's optimism about America's geostrategic future—and his sharp dismissal of the naysayers who overemphasized the extent of America's decline—as a significant influence on his own diplomatic thinking.⁴⁰ National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon appeared on Charlie Rose's television show, talking in detail about 'Kagan's essay and Obama's love of it'.⁴¹ The essay—drawn from Kagan's then forthcoming book *The world America made*—contained few insights that the President would dispute, even though Kagan partly intended it as a critique of Obama:

³⁸ 'An American century: a strategy to secure America's enduring interests and ideals', <http://www.mittromney.com/collection/foreign-policy>, accessed 18 July 2012.

³⁹ 'Mitt Romney delivers remarks on US foreign policy', <http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/10/mitt-romney-delivers-remarks-us-foreign-policy>.

⁴⁰ The naysayers are legion, and some have been saying nay, as Kagan has noted pointedly, for a very long time. Two recently published 'declinist' accounts are Charles Kupchan's *No-one's world: the West, the rising rest, and the coming global turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Andrew Bacevich, ed., *The short American century: a postmortem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Ezra Klein, 'Wonkbook: Robert Kagan, Obama's favorite Romney adviser', 30 Jan. 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/wonkbook-robert-kagan-obamas-favorite-romney-adviser/2012/01/30/gIQAj1wEcQ_blog.html, accessed 18 July 2012.

Pragmatism or what?

The present world order is as fragile as it is unique. Preserving it has been a struggle in every decade and will remain a struggle in the decades to come. Those presidents who have come to office expecting to be able to do less have quickly faced the stark reality—often more apparent to presidents than presidential candidates—that preserving the present world order requires constant American leadership and constant American commitment.⁴²

Obama's endorsement of Kagan was probably genuine. It was incontrovertibly savvy. Not only did Obama thereby smartly position himself on the side of Reaganian optimism, he also robbed Mitt Romney of the added value that Kagan provided to his campaign.

Kagan served as an adviser to John McCain in 2008 and he adds heft to Romney's foreign policy credentials this time round. Commonly but misleadingly identified as a neo-conservative—he does not recommend the blanket export of American values—Kagan believes in the indispensability of American power and geostrategic primacy.⁴³ Yet it is difficult to identify many substantive differences between Kagan's counsel and the substantive aspects of Obama's diplomacy—at least beyond the manner of its presentation. This reality was partly laid bare in February 2012, when Romney published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* criticizing the incomplete nature of the President's 'pivot' in Asia and his general handling of relations with China:

President Obama came into office as a near supplicant to Beijing, almost begging it to continue buying American debt so as to finance his profligate spending here at home ... Now, three years into his term, the president has belatedly responded with a much-ballyhooed 'pivot' to Asia, a phrase that may prove to be as gimmicky and vacuous as his 'reset' with Russia. The supposed pivot has been oversold and carries with it an unintended consequence: It has left our allies with the worrying impression that we left the region and might do so again ... Unless China changes its ways, on day one of my presidency I will designate it a currency manipulator and take appropriate counteraction. A trade war with China is the last thing I want, but I cannot tolerate our current trade surrender.⁴⁴

Not long after Romney's article was published, Kagan appeared on the television show *The Colbert Report*, where he was asked if he endorsed any aspects of Obama's diplomacy. A fair-minded scholar, Kagan replied: 'I think he has a good policy in Asia, particularly in dealing with China. I think he's strengthened our position in Asia with our allies.' Had Romney not at that point been trying to close the ideological gap with Rick Santorum, one senses he might have agreed with Kagan.⁴⁵

⁴² Robert Kagan, *The world America made* (New York: Knopf, 2012), p. 134.

⁴³ Readers will be hard pressed to locate the idealistic strain commonly attributed to 'neo-conservatives' in any of his books, which include *Of paradise and power: America and Europe in the new world order* (New York: Knopf, 2003), *Dangerous nation: America's place in the world from the earliest days to the dawn of the twentieth century* (New York: Knopf, 2006) and *The return of history and the end of dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

⁴⁴ Mitt Romney, 'How I'll respond to China's rising power', *Wall Street Journal*, 16 Feb. 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204880404577225340763595570.html>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁴⁵ Ali Gharib, 'Romney adviser Robert Kagan: Obama has "good policy in Asia, particularly in dealing with China"', *Thinkprogress Security*, 22 Feb. 2012, <http://thinkprogress.org/security/2012/02/22/430809/kagan-romney-obama-china/?mobile=nc>, accessed 18 July 2012.

Aaron L. Friedberg, a professor of politics and international relations at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, is another of Romney's foreign policy advisers. His 2011 book, *A contest for supremacy: China, America, and the struggle for mastery in Asia*, issues a stern warning that the United States is 'on track to lose' the strategic battle for power and influence in the Western Pacific.⁴⁶ He chides the Obama administration for focusing too intently on engagement with Beijing and not devoting sufficient resources to contingency planning should the worst-case scenario materialize in the form of armed conflict over any number of issues.

This was a damning critique when Friedberg wrote the book, but less so in the months after it was published. In November 2011, the President announced that the United States would station an additional 2,500 troops in northern Australia: their strategic purpose was clear enough and China was predictably nonplussed. In addition, Secretary of State Clinton has been proactive in encouraging Burma (Myanmar) to move in the direction of genuine independence and pull itself away from Beijing's orbit. Finally, the Obama administration has been steadfast in supporting the Philippines over China's strong-armed approach to their territorial dispute in the South China Sea. On the deck of a US warship in Manila Bay—one need not be Freudian to discern a message—Secretary of State Clinton announced that 'we are making sure that our collective defense capabilities and communications infrastructure are operationally and materially capable of deterring provocations from the full spectrum of state and nonstate actors'. Ramon Casiple, executive director of the Manila-based Institute for Political and Economic Reform, observed that 'Filipinos appreciate symbolism'.⁴⁷

In a similar fashion to Romney, therefore, Obama has met and disarmed his critics by doing or saying much of what they suggest. The President is no George McGovern—a bona fide left-wing Democrat trounced by Richard Nixon in the election of 1972—much as Republican strategists would like to portray him that way. So Obama is well placed to parry the critique of a Kagan or a Friedberg, meaning that Romney will have to turn to his über-hawks if he genuinely wants to attack Obama's record. He may pursue this option, of course, though it is probable that he will critically injure his electoral prospects in so doing.

In May 2012 Colin Powell queried the quality of the foreign policy advice Mitt Romney was receiving. On MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, he cautioned: 'I don't know who all of his advisers are, but I've seen some of the names and some of them are quite far to the right. And sometimes they might be in a position to make judgments or recommendations to the candidate that should get a second thought.'⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A contest for supremacy: China, America, and the struggle for mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

⁴⁷ Quoted in Floyd Whaley, 'Clinton reaffirms military ties with the Philippines', *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/world/asia/clinton-reaffirms-military-ties-with-the-philippines.html>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁴⁸ Rachel Weiner, 'Colin Powell questions Mitt Romney's foreign policy, comes out in support of gay marriage', *Washington Post*, 23 May 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/colin-powell-questions-mitt-romneys-foreign-policy-comes-out-in-support-of-gay-marriage/2012/05/23/gJQApcbLlU_blog.html, accessed 18 July 2012.

While John Bolton and Cofer Black—the head of the CIA’s counterterrorism programme under George W. Bush, described memorably by journalist Eli Lake as ‘Romney’s envoy to the dark side’—were always likely to raise Powell’s hackles, Kagan and Friedberg are simply not as strident and unburdened by doubt as Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld.⁴⁹ Of course, there is always the chance that Romney might try something bold to enliven the Republican base—which in this case would be citing Bolton and Black as his north and south stars—just as John McCain did in selecting Sarah Palin as his running-mate. But it seems more likely that Romney will resist the temptation to evoke doom-laden scenarios requiring strenuous military effort when the nation remains so mired in debt. Peter Feaver, a professor of political science at Duke University who served on George W. Bush’s National Security Council, has sensibly urged Romney to ‘walk back from reckless campaign promises’.⁵⁰ The best available evidence suggests he will do exactly that. And if Romney does win the election in November, neo-conservatives are likely to find his administration as unwelcoming as Wilsonians have found Obama’s.

Conclusion

In his classic series of lectures on the meaning of pragmatism, William James observed that ‘at the outset, at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method ... the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, “categories”, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.’⁵¹ Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney are classically pragmatic in that their manner of thinking is geared to the consideration of facts and the anticipation of consequences; first principles are given short shrift.

There are clear differences in the two men’s styles—they clearly vary on the pragmatic theme. Romney’s manner of presentation consciously emulates Ronald Reagan’s smorgasbord of optimism, ideology and Manichaeism which was met with such public approval. But like Reagan in his second term, Romney is likely to act in ways substantively different from how he talks. Rich Williamson, a veteran Republican foreign policy adviser, has struggled to make the case that the candidates are unlike in significant ways. Williamson identifies ‘fundamental differences about a naive faith in engagement and a dangerous reliance on the Security Council versus having an approach where you have strength, where you’re willing to lead, and where you have strong relationships with our friends and allies’.⁵² But who could honestly say that Obama is not willing to lead or have strong relationships with friends and allies? And would the results-focused

⁴⁹ Eli Lake, ‘Meet Mitt Romney’s trusted envoy to the dark side, Cofer Black’, *The Daily Beast*, 11 April 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/11/meet-mitt-romney-s-trusted-envoy-to-the-dark-side-cofer-black.html>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁵⁰ Peter Feaver, ‘Shadow government’ blog, *Foreign Policy*, <http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/blog/2195>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁵¹ William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. and intr. Bruce Kuklick (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 29.

⁵² Jackie Northam, ‘Analysts try to define Romney’s foreign policy’, NPR, 4 June 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/04/154268367/analysts-try-to-define-romneys-foreign-policy>, accessed 18 July 2012.

Romney ignore the United Nations—and abjure engagement—when it might serve a useful function? Romney’s pragmatism is certainly not as intellectually or as deeply rooted as Obama’s. And the smokescreen of belligerence released by his advisers serves to obscure Romney’s instinctive caution. Nonetheless, Obama and Romney are largely cut from the same cloth.

As his Nobel address illustrated, the gap between President Obama’s rhetoric—at least while in office—and his method is not so large. Few could have felt any great betrayal in the foreign policy that has followed the speech. Benjamin Rhodes, one of the President’s deputy national security advisers, was once asked to sketch the outline of an Obama Doctrine. ‘If you were to boil it all down to a bumper sticker,’ he replied, ‘it’s “Wind down these two wars, reestablish American standing and leadership in the world, and focus on a broad set of priorities, from Asia and the global economy to a nuclear nonproliferation regime”.’⁵³ Of course, this is no doctrine—and it certainly wouldn’t fit on a bumper sticker. But this diffuse approach means that Obama is quite capable of amending a policy-in-progress if circumstances happen to change. Both he (and Romney) appear to share John Maynard Keynes’s view that ‘when the facts change I change my mind.’⁵⁴ The absence of a doctrine makes Obama’s foreign policy supple.

Mitt Romney’s big idea appears to be that the United States is more than capable of leading the world for another century and that a pervasive negativity has neutered American leadership. This distinguishes his bold and distinctly American values from those that the Tea Party attribute to President Obama—that he is un-American, a moral relativist, a ‘declinist’. So Romney’s principal foreign policy approach thus far has been predicated on using the President as a straw man. This has worked well through the Republican primaries—whose constituents largely view Obama as toxic—but the national stage is different. The fact that the straw man has praised Robert Kagan has disarmed one of Romney’s principal lines of attack. It will be interesting to see whether Romney persists in this approach through the remainder of the campaign and during the presidential debates. If he attacks Obama’s caution and timidity, then the President has a strong reply: George W. Bush showed that boldness is not always a virtue.

Writing in the *Weekly Standard*, William Kristol observed perceptively that ‘Mitt Romney is an intelligent, hardworking, pragmatic problem-solver with a conservative disposition. He might as well present himself that way. It will be easier than any alternative self-presentation, and has the added advantage that it’s probably what a majority of the country wants right now. So we say to our fellow conservatives: Let Romney be Romney.’⁵⁵ There is, of course, a blind spot in Kristol’s analysis: his first sentence also describes Barack Obama. Romney’s primary virtues—his competence and diligence—are also the President’s. A chasm certainly separates the candidates on domestic policy, and Congress is an alarmingly polarized and ineffectual place. On foreign policy, however, Obama’s

⁵³ Lizza, ‘The consequentialist’.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Nicholas Wapshot, *Keynes Hayek: the clash that defined modern economics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company,), p. 83.

⁵⁵ William Kristol, ‘Let Romney be Romney’, *Weekly Standard* 17: 33, 14 May 2012.

and Romney's shared method suggests that the ideational future of US foreign policy will be pragmatic. President Obama has shown his hand already. Romney, for his part, seems likely to follow the opposite trajectory to George W. Bush: moving from strident values-laden rhetoric on the campaign trail to moderation in the Oval Office. Romney's biography certainly suggests he will do or say whatever it takes to win—an 'etch-a-sketch', as Romney adviser Eric Fehrnstrom ill-advisedly described him—and then govern as a results-driven centrist.⁵⁶ Laying down plans with a permanent marker tends to concentrate the mind.

Robert Kagan is insightful when correcting declinist misperceptions regarding the extent of America's decline, and the date at which China will become a true peer competitor. But a multitude of factors make it highly improbable that the United States would attempt to wage two wars—including one 'of choice'—concurrently as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵⁷ Pragmatism fell out of favour during the Cold War when grand 'theories' dominated foreign policy discourse and the principal opponent's ideology had the declared aim of extinguishing all others.⁵⁸ The Bush administration's 'war on terror' sought to reinvigorate this existential dynamic, but few remain convinced that the magnitude of the threat posed by radical Islam is comparable to that formerly posed by Marxism/Leninism. Thus the stage is set for America's principal contribution to philosophy—pragmatism—to guide its foreign policy.

⁵⁶ Michael D. Shear, 'For Romney's trusted adviser, "etch a sketch" comment is a rare misstep', *New York Times*, 21 March 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/22/us/politics/etch-a-sketch-remark-a-rare-misstep-for-romney-adviser.html>, accessed 18 July 2012.

⁵⁷ See Richard N. Haass, *War of necessity, war of choice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

⁵⁸ See the epilogue to Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: a story of ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001).

