



Prudence and the Obama Doctrine

By Robert G. Kaufman

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Abstract: This article examines the Obama Doctrine's main tenets, assesses its operation—focusing on the geopolitically crucial regions of Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East—and then offers concluding observations about the trajectory and consequences of this doctrine.

Is there really an Obama Doctrine, a distinct grand strategy informing the president's foreign and national security policies? Or does the search for coherence confuse rather than clarify matters? Prominent defenders of the Administration not only deny the existence of an Obama Doctrine, but also praise the president for wisely choosing pragmatism and flexibility as a less rigid alternative. Some detractors, however, fault him for lacking sufficient interest in foreign policy to define or adhere to any core strategy.¹ Neither of these perspectives is correct. President Barack Obama came to office as a *conviction politician* rather than a *consensus politician*, aspiring to transform the relationship between government and the individual, as well as between the United States and the world. He has articulated a clear, logically consistent national security strategy that has crystallized into doctrine during his second term. His administration has pursued it with remarkable fidelity, despite the vagaries of practical politics compelling even *conviction politicians* to compromise.

Context for the Obama Doctrine

Barack Obama's meteoric rise owes more to the appeal of his personal narrative and his protean theme of change than to a long, well-defined, controversial

¹ Fareed Zakaria, "Stop Looking for the Obama Doctrine," *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/stop-searching-for-an-obama-doctrine/2011/07/06/gIQAQMmI1Hstory.html>; Will Inboden, "Looking for an Obama Doctrine that Doesn't Exist," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 6, 2013, <http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/09/16/lookingforanobamadoctrinethatdoesntexist>.

record emblematic of Ronald Reagan's ascent to the presidency. Yet Harvard historian James T. Kloppenberg, author of a reverential intellectual biography of Obama, rightly locates the President on the American political spectrum as a man of the left. Kloppenberg sees this reflected in Obama's formative experiences, two major books, pre-presidential speeches, progressive voting record in the Senate, and the dominant theme of his successful 2008 presidential campaign.² By Obama's own account, he came of age during the Reagan presidency, defining his views as the antithesis of Reagan's. His decision to become a community organizer arose from his conviction that "change was imperative, foremost in the White House, where Reagan and his minions were carrying on their dirty deeds." The designation of anti-Reaganite "man of the left" also encapsulates his early and evolving views on America's role in the world. The young Obama assailed the "effects of Reagan's policies toward the Third World, his administration's support for the apartheid regime in South Africa. The more Obama studied nuclear arms policy, the more he "found Star Wars to be ill-conceived."³

Obama's 2002 speech categorically opposing the impending war in Iraq helped vault him to national prominence, distinguishing him from other liberal Democratic senators, such as Hillary Clinton of New York, who voted to authorize the Bush Administration's use of force to depose Saddam Hussein. In 2007, Senator Obama voted against President Bush's 2007 surge in Iraq, predicting it would fail. He called instead for an immediate withdrawal of all American combat brigades from Iraq to be completed by March 2008. Obama's full-throated critique of the Iraq war galvanized the Democratic Party's base, which had expressed unhappiness with President Bill Clinton's triangulation to the center of American politics during the 1990s. Obama's unbridled antiwar stand may even have tipped the balance in his razor-close primary contest with then Senator Clinton. Running for president in 2008, Obama offered a "sweeping liberal foreign policy critique," repudiating President Bush's doctrine of preemption and his reliance on a narrow coalition of the willing, in favor of multilateralism, cooperation, nuclear non-proliferation, and negotiation.⁴

² James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Kloppenberg is also a man of the left, criticizing the president on rare occasions for not being progressive enough. See review by David Greenberg, "Hope, Change, Nietzsche," *The New Republic*, May 26 2011, <http://www.newrepublic.com/book/review/reading-obama-james-kloppenberg>. President Obama described himself to Nancy Reagan as "a lefty," as quoted in Michael Duffy and Michael Scherer, "The Role Model: What Obama Sees in Reagan," *Time*, Jan. 27, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044712,00.html>.

³ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), pp. 133 and p. 289; Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 289.

⁴ Spencer Ackerman, "The Obama Doctrine," *The American Prospect*, March 19, 2008, <http://prospect.org/article/obama-doctrine>; Elisabeth Bumiller, "A Cast of 300 Advises Obama on Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, July 18, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/18/us/politics/18advisers.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

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