

Morality and Pragmatism in the Obama Doctrine

Written by Edwin A. Taylor III

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EDWIN A. TAYLOR III, JUN 5 2012

Whither wanders US foreign policy? As the 2012 presidential elections approach this question will inevitably emerge in the minds of academics, policy wonks and, most importantly, voters. Even with the eventual terminus of the war in Iraq, other conflicts continue to present challenges to American national interests. In this context, it is necessary to cast a retrospective look at the foreign policy that has emerged under the leadership of Barack Obama and the direction of that foreign policy should the president succeed in his reelection ambitions. Has the United States ship of state drifted into a sea of challenges adrift and absent a rudder, or does it sail into churning seas under the guidance of a steady sextant? Much speculation remains as to what sort of foreign policy captain President Obama is and, more pointedly, as to whether the president has articulated foreign policy doctrine specific to his administration. This essay focuses on that question. Although there has been a range of policy actions undertaken in response to the multitude of foreign policy quandaries facing the United States, through major policy speeches and in action, a general framework of a specific foreign policy doctrine has emerged under the Obama administration. This doctrine is one of moral pragmatism and this framework is consistent with the counterinsurgency tactic of drone strikes pursued by the administration in the conduct of the war in Afghanistan.

The Difficulty of Foreign Policy Doctrine

In many respects discussions of presidential doctrines in foreign policy may seem out of sync with the rapidly changing nature of the global threats to and opportunities for US interests. (Zakaria, 2011) Clearly the foreign policy landscape of the new millennium is not the topography of the Cold War and the threat of global communism. Simply speaking, the explosion of and the disparate nature of threats to US interests that have emerged in the last ten years has not only made the United States less secure but also made its foreign policy path increasingly risky and perilous. Arguably, in this context a single foreign policy doctrine, even on a narrow policy sector such as the use of force seems difficult to imagine. Complicating the search for an Obama doctrine is the problem that by staking a claim to a presidential foreign policy doctrine risks overemphasizing the ability of a single political actor within a complicated and competing foreign policy apparatus to shape foreign policy outcomes.

In spite of this, there still exists a desire for the clarity and accompanying sense of determination that emanates from a president that articulates a foreign policy doctrine. Every American president desires to leave a definitive mark on the conduct and trajectory of US foreign affairs and President Obama is no different. Even though many have questioned the coherence of the Obama administration's foreign policy, and despite the difficulties of doctrinaire thinking in the post-9/11 world, a consistent foreign policy doctrine has emerged under Obama. That doctrine is one guided by moral pragmatism, a foreign policy doctrine that seeks to advance US moral interests and values through technocratic solutions to functional problems. While moral pragmatism may not provide a clever catchphrase for the foreign policy community, it does provide a systematic paradigm for the conduct of US foreign policy that is consistent with the political style of Obama himself.

Moral Pragmatism as a Foreign Policy Doctrine

If moral pragmatism is the core of the Obama doctrine, the subsequent question is what does moral pragmatism mean in this context? As a basis for foreign policy decision-making, moral pragmatism remains committed to serving US interests through engineering solutions to problems within the moral context of the American experience. In

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practice that means foreign policy outcomes grounded in the moral vision of US political culture but implemented as practical and cautious solutions to clearly defined problems in global politics. Thus, moral pragmatism requires a consideration of the intersection of morality and interest in the conduct of foreign affairs. If foreign policy is interest-based, then achieving US interests is a matter of indentifying the obstacles to our goals and developing what are perceived as functional solutions to those problems. While there is no guarantee as to the inevitable success of these solutions, the pragmatic approach is one that requires a constant engagement with dynamic as opposed to static solutions.

This approach fits with the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes American political culture as loosely characterized in the writings of Max Weber. (Schlesinger, 1983) If one solution fails to work, the practical and pragmatic approach demands innovation and response. Moreover, beyond the academic works of Weber, which are regrettably inaccessible to the average citizen, this pragmatic approach meshes with our own socialized understanding of the rise of America, where honest, energetic, and hardworking men captured the spirit of the American people to live by experiment and wits to tame a wild continent. De Tocqueville himself noted in his discussion of the American approach to philosophy that Americans are "...easily led to the conclusion that everything in the world can be explained and that nothing passes beyond the limits of intelligence." (de Tocqueville, 1969) In practice, for those engaged in US policy making there are no mysteries, no superstitions, and no pressing philosophical questions of why; there exist only the real and immediate question of **what is** and **what can be done**. Policy making for the pragmatist is problem solving, and this approach is much as De Tocqueville noted about the American character as one that is "... accustomed to rely on the witness of their own eyes." The analogy is that of the engineer who seeks to discover how to move water uphill in spite of the problem of gravity. An obstacle to our foreign policy goals arises, the problem is indentified, a solution is proposed and implemented, and if it fails, then the solution is reengineered. But the Obama doctrine is not solely engineering blueprints to the problems that beset the United States in global affairs. If it were, the Obama doctrine would be no different than the foreign policies that emerge from the rational actor school of foreign policy thought. The difference rests with the careful balance between a purely pragmatic interest-centric policy and one that situates the ultimate ends of foreign policy objects within a cultural context that the general public can access and reconcile.

American presidents are rarely engineers and blueprints rarely move a nation. Pragmatic solutions, no matter how neat they may appear, seldom capture a national sense of zeitgeist. That American foreign policy engages what is perceived to be the unique moral position of the United States in the world should surprise few observers. Our revolutionary sentiment was rife with it as illustrated by Thomas Paine's charge that "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again" and to Wilson's claim that the United States is "the only idealistic nation in the world" granted the "infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world." (Sheslinger, 1983) As a candidate for president in 1974 Ronald Reagan recognized the need to cultivate the moral rhetoric surrounding America's place in the world with his comments that "...there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage."

For the Obama doctrine, loosely constructed as it may be, it is the intersection of morality and pragmatism that provides coherence to a host of policy initiatives in a vastly complicated and dangerous world, a sentiment made manifest in Obama's address to the Nobel Prize committee in 2009. Morality is made evident first as he lays forth the moral component to the use of force by the United States. Drawing heavily from the just war doctrine, in his address Obama noted the necessity of the United States in following the international standards regarding the use of force in achieving policy goals. However, this is more than just an attempt to assuage what had become a "reflexive superstition of America the world's sole military superpower"; it is a clear definition of what would be the core of an Obama foreign policy. The very legitimacy of US foreign policy under Obama is predicated upon these core moral principles as he noted in the address, "America—in fact no nation—can insist that others follow the rules of the road if we refuse to follow them ourselves. For when we don't, our actions appear arbitrary and undercut the legitimacy of future interventions, no matter how justified." (Obama, 2009) Consequently, the use of force is grounded in a manner that serves broad moral principles "...based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual..." (Obama, 2009) Still, morality is infused with pragmatism, which is the key difference in the Obama doctrine. In the same speech, Obama drew upon the words of Martin Luther King Jr. to acknowledge, "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem; it merely creates new and more complicated ones." (Obama, 2009) For the Obama

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doctrine, force must be in service to moral principles but guided by pragmatism for “To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.” (Obama, 2009)

Moral Pragmatism, Counterinsurgency, and Drone Strikes

Of course the Nobel Acceptance speech was three years ago and even though these sentiments were echoed in other key foreign policy addresses by President Obama, including his New Beginnings Speech in Cairo, words are one thing; deeds are another. Consequently it is necessary to assess if moral pragmatism manifests as a practiced Obama doctrine. Specifically, does the use of drone strikes as part of the administration’s counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan challenge the moral pragmatism that is at the core of the Obama doctrine?

The answer in part lies in the legal distinction between assassination and targeted killing. If the drone strikes were the equivalent of an assassination they would violate the moral principles embedded in the Obama Doctrine regarding the use of force. However, as Syracuse Law Professor William Banks and George Washington Law Professor Peter Raven-Hansen have argued, targeted killings of terrorists is “not unlawful and would not constitute assassination.” (Banks, 2002-2003) If targeted killings are an extension of the use of force beyond the traditional battlefield, then this action is justified under a principle of measured self-defense. In fact, this reasoning was advanced by the administration at the end of April of this year. (White House in First Detailed Comments on Drone Strikes, 2012) While we may disagree over whether the Obama administration was correct in the use of this particular strategy or as to its effects or effectiveness, that it is consistent with the moral underpinnings of the Obama Doctrine appears strong.

Moreover the drone strikes appear to be part of a consistent policy of engineering solutions in the ongoing war on terror. While a substantial portion of the counterinsurgency strategy is focused on winning the trust of the population, the core of the problem in Afghanistan is still an insurgency network that cannot be effectively neutralized without the use of hard power. The use of targeted killings reflects the fact that an insurgency is primarily a military engagement that functions outside the confines of a traditional battlefield. Thus, if the battlefield is no longer conventional, then the pragmatic solution is to move beyond the conventional battlefield and find effective mechanisms for destroying the capabilities of the insurgent network. Targeted killings through drone strikes are simply a component of a larger blue print for stabilizing Afghanistan and advancing in the ongoing war on terror.

Regardless of the sentiments inspired by a retrospective of the past three years of US foreign policy, the Obama Doctrine that has been developed and implemented is reasonably consistent, even in the contested debate over the use of counterinsurgency tactics. On November 6, 2012 the American voters will decide whether the moral pragmatism of the Obama Doctrine will continue to found our foreign policy courses or if academics and pundits can begin the search anew for a “Romney Doctrine” in US foreign policy.

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