The Obama Doctrine: Intervention after the War on Terror

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JACK HOLLAND, MAY 23 2011

The shooting of Osama Bin Laden, President Obama's latest foreign policy speech, and the looming drawdown of American forces in Afghanistan all point towards a welcome possibility: the sun may soon set on the War on Terror. This could be Obama's 9/11 moment: the twilight of an ending era, followed by a slow dawn. And as Obama is acutely aware, America's tomorrow is still to be written.

The shooting of Osama bin Laden has induced the most open moment in American politics and security since the events of September 11th, 2001. This small act, colossal in symbolic significance for Americans, could mark the beginning of the end of the War on Terror. Closing the chapter on terror has been an important desire driving Obama's ambitions since the launch of a particularly 'dumb war' in 2003. Less clear, is what Obama envisages next? An overt liberal, it is unsurprising that his speech to the State Department emphasises American values and downplays American interests. Inevitably, however, in this admirable recalibration, two crucial questions remain unanswered: To what extent can foreign policy promote American values? And by what means should American values be promoted?

On the first question, Obama remains a Democrat caught in a classic liberal tension. Supporting and encouraging the spread of democracy is hardly new to American foreign policy. It was at the centre of Bush's 2005 'Freedom Agenda' and Bill Clinton's earlier policy of enlarging the zone of peace. For Clinton, however, it was secondary to a desire to spread free markets. When the chips were down, economics trumped values. The embarrassment of Clinton's spectacular U-turn on China in 1994 stands as stark warning for an Obama Administration reliant upon the stability of an autocratic Saudi Arabia. The prospects of crude oil at $250 a barrel and tripled petrol prices will ensure that Obama's liberalism has limits.

On the second question, Obama also remains a Democrat caught in a classic liberal tension. On the one hand, he exudes the deliberative caution, risk assessment and nuance of Thomas Jefferson. On the other hand, he has begun to speak of universal American values in a presidential voice reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson. His most recent speech shifts the balance from the calculated cost-benefit timidity of Cairo in 2009 towards a far more robust American exceptionalism. As professor-in-chief, Obama feels that the fierce urgency of the Arab Spring has granted him both reason and right to lecture. It is the death of Bin Laden that has afforded him the space to speak out at home. But abroad, after two years of disappointment, his audience is far less engaged.

Looking at Obama's record to date, we can find evidence to suggest how words might be matched with actions. In Libya, Obama was a reluctant but willing warrior: reluctant due to recent history, willing due to moral outrage. Obama did not lead calls to intervene in Libya; he was scarred by the context of War on Terror. These scars placed the prospect of putting boots on the ground or explicitly seeking regime change off limits. Instead, Obama supported a multilateral operation fought from the air, minimising the risks to America's image and military personnel. His Jeffersonian desire to avoid risks was accommodated within Wilsonian calls to defend universal human rights.

In Afghanistan, Obama took ninety days to deliberate a troop surge requested by military leaders. The gains on offer were painstakingly weighed against the potential pitfalls, as Obama anguished over a decision he felt compelled to

make in spite of his reservations. The promise of a surge followed by quick withdrawal, like the compromise on troop numbers, was indicative of a president reluctant to put Americans in harm's way. Technology has helped Obama to square the circle of fighting without the risk of dying. The hum of American drones has become increasingly familiar in parts of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. Piloted remotely, Obama's preference for the use of drones reflects his desire to minimise risks to American life. Given this desire, it is likely that the freedom and democracy of others will not be achieved at the expense of American blood.

Obama came to power concerned at the corrupting influence of ill-advised interventions overseas, the erosion of civil liberties at home and their root cause in the imperial presidency. He sought to create a more perfect union at home that curbed the damaging excesses of a War on Terror characterised by a permanent state of emergency. As critics have been quick to note, the rhetoric of change quickly ran up against the realities of the Oval Office. And yet all of Obama's decisions have been shaped by a prudent, consistent caution. Wilson's legacy has been hijacked in recent years by a neoconservative proclivity to use military means to pursue liberal ends. Obama provides a necessary and important counterweight to this tendency. While prepared to fight, Obama's first concerns are for American life and the preservation of democracy at home, not its spread abroad. The interventionism of the immediate post War on Terror era will be limited and primarily linguistic. When circumstance demands and allows, Obama's interventions will continue to be fought from the lofty heights of exceptionalist rhetoric and American air power.

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Dr Jack Holland is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Surrey and part of the new *Centre for International Intervention. He has written extensively on 9/11 and the War on Terror.*

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