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## Barack Obama: From an End to Terror to Drone Wars and ISIS

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## Chapter Three

### Barack Obama: From an End to Terror to Drone Wars and ISIS

Barack Obama came to office with a mandate to reverse George W. Bush's policies. As Daniel Klaidman writes, "Obama was elected, in part, to wind down the wars of 9/11, to reduce America's global footprint, and to refocus national energies on challenges at home and core interests abroad"<sup>1</sup>. Obama's relative quiescence on the terror threat led Benjamin H. Friedman and I ask to, in a 2012 conference paper, "What Happened to the Terror Threat?"<sup>2</sup>.

Where George W. Bush sought to stoke fears in order to sell policies and set an expansive anti-terrorist agenda, Obama was more careful and calibrated in his words about terrorists. His rhetoric deviated from Bush's themes in many respects as will be evidenced in this chapter. Obama exhibited the power of presidential rhetoric to assuage the public. The Founders saw the value in public speech-making as a way to calm public concerns and envisioned that the purpose of presidential rhetoric would be to stifle mass fear as Obama attempted to do<sup>3</sup>.

Obama introduced a new vision for the war against terror. Prior to becoming President, Obama's "most famous foreign policy stance" was his strong opposition to the war in Iraq. Obama specifically doubted, in a 2002 speech he made as a Senator, the possibility of externally imposing democracy on Iraqis<sup>4</sup>. As a candidate, Obama sought to link the world's problems to America. He noted that poverty in other countries could create the conditions for radicalism and terrorism<sup>5</sup>. As Wesley Windmaier observed, "Over the first decade of the 2000s, the George W. Bush administration's crusading excesses incited the Obama administration's realist restraint"<sup>6</sup>. This restraint and desire to undo Bush's expansive policies motivated the early Obama administration.

Despite that, this chapter will show that Obama's rhetoric failed to achieve substantive policy changes in the complex, thorny world of undoing a worldwide counterterror war machine and that Obama's policies and rhetoric were more pragmatic than idealistic. Indeed, Obama's goal of recalibrating the terror threat was paired with the goal to seem tough to America's adversaries and to project security to the American public. This chapter will show that the story of a president who conducted and spoke about the terror war in the diametrically opposite way to his predecessor is not true. In fact, Obama ended up maintaining much of President George

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<sup>1</sup> Klaidman, Daniel. *Kill or Capture: The War on Terrorism and the Soul of the Obama Presidency* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin 2012), pgs. 48-49.

<sup>2</sup> Friedman, Benjamin H. and Gabriel Rubin, "What Happened to the Terror Threat?", Southern Political Science Association's annual conference, 12 January, 2012, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>3</sup> Tulis, Jeffrey K. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2017), pg. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Saunders, Elizabeth N. *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2011), pg. 215.

<sup>5</sup> Saunders, *Leaders at War*, pg. 216.

<sup>6</sup> Windmaier, Wesley W. *Presidential Rhetoric from Wilson to Obama: Constructing Crises, Fast and Slow* (New York, NY: Routledge 2015), pg. 104.

W. Bush's policies and practices including the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay (which he did empty of most detainees), the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars (though he did wind down Iraq only to get dragged back in by ISIS), and the USA Patriot Act. Obama notably eliminated George W. Bush's "enhanced interrogation" program but cynically replaced it with a program of lethal drone<sup>7</sup> strikes. President Obama also, as his tenure progressed, was not opposed to employing the rhetoric of fear or of playing up the terrorist threat. He also had to recalibrate his rhetoric in light of what turned out to be a very real threat from ISIS<sup>8</sup>. The next section will delve into some ways that Obama's rhetoric on terrorism diverged from Bush 43's according to the database on presidential rhetoric gathered for this book.

### **"No Drama" Obama: A Distinct Change in Terrorism Themes**

Obama made many fewer speeches than Bush did regarding the terror threat. So much fewer that we had to re-check the data multiple times to see if our numbers on Obama were, in fact, correct. Counting speeches where some derivation of the word "terror" was made three times, Obama's rhetoric on terrorism jumps out as demonstrably less voluminous than Bush's. George W. Bush made a huge amount of speeches in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: 85 in 2001 and 169 in 2002, but then made between 28 and 30 speeches every other year of his presidency with one exception – in 2006 when he was selling the Iraq troop surge he made 46 speeches. Obama's high annual number of terrorism speeches (28) equated to Bush's low. Between 2011 and 2014, a four year period, Obama made only 45 total terrorism speeches – one less than Bush did in 2006 alone. It was during this period (in 2013) that Obama declared that al Qaeda was "on the path to defeat" and that another 9/11 was unlikely<sup>9</sup>. Obama made only 15 terrorism speeches in 2011, 9 in 2012, 10 in 2013 and 11 in 2014. Note that Osama bin-Laden was killed on May 2, 2011, which Obama saw as a bookend to the 9/11 attacks.

The rise of ISIS, however, led Obama to refocus on the terror threat. He made 22 terrorism speeches in 2015 and 18 in 2016. Interestingly, Obama's speeches on terrorism were most frequent in the beginning and end of his term. He made 22 such speeches in 2009 and 28 in 2010 as he sought to unwind Bush's policies. He then substantially toned down his rhetoric on terrorism until it was more than obvious that ISIS was an important threat that the country needed to face. Whereas Bush's post-9/11 terrorism speech frequency looks like a large bump followed by a plateau, Obama's looks like a small bump followed by a trough and another small bump (see Chart 1.1). To this end, Obama's speech-making on terrorism did not markedly change from his first to his second term. He was always pragmatic about the terror threat and throughout

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<sup>7</sup> Here the term "drone" will be used to refer to armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

<sup>8</sup> The terror group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or just the Islamic State will be referred to heretofore as "ISIS."

<sup>9</sup> Byman, Daniel, "What Trump Should Do About Terrorism (But Probably Won't)," Brookings Institution, 16 February 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-trump-should-do-about-terrorism-but-probably-wont/>.

continued with most of George W. Bush's programs. Obama's speech frequency on the subject jumped when he was trying to change or sell policies – such as in the beginning of his first term when he sought to close the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center and toward the end of his second term when he sought to mobilize against the threat of ISIS.

President Obama consciously wanted to recalibrate how America viewed its terrorist enemies. He purposely used concrete terms for describing them. No longer would the terms “barbaric” or “evil” be used. Obama saw rhetoric as critically important in conveying the terror threat level to the public. Ironically, he was much more careful with his words than he was with his deeds – as he carried out a much deadlier assassination program of Muslim terrorists than any of his predecessors had<sup>10</sup>. With few exceptions, the database shows that Obama typically referred to America's opponents by the names of the groups they were in (when, like Bush, he wasn't calling them “terrorists”).

### **[Insert Table 3.1 Here]**

The biggest change between Obama and Bush is that Obama no longer called terrorists “evil” or “murderers/killers” or “barbarians.” Instead, he largely stuck to concrete terms such as al Qaeda, al Nusra Front, and the Taliban. Note in Table 3.1 how Obama moved from a focus on al Qaeda and extremism to a heavy focus on ISIS. Here we see Obama scrambling in his final years in office to show that he took the ISIS threat seriously, even though his initial impulse was to diminish and dismiss the group.

With the rise of ISIS, Obama did some policy selling of his own as he pushed for more resources for the fight against the so-called “caliphate.” Obama's disciplined rhetoric turned to the language of fear and hyperbole in 2015 and 2016. In 2015, Obama referred to terrorists as “killers” for the only time in his tenure and referred to ISIS as an “apocalyptic cult.” In 2016, he referred to ISIS as “enemies of peace.” These rhetorical forays are nothing compared to Bush's terms used for terrorists. In 2003 alone, Bush 43 called terrorists “thugs,” “evil,” “brutal,” “cruel,” and referred to them as “a hidden network of killers.”

As a candidate, Obama sought to focus American counterterror policy on al Qaeda and the war in Afghanistan and to wind down the Iraq conflict. Chart 3.1 exhibits what countries and conflicts Obama linked the terror threat to over his two terms in office. When Obama began his first term, the Afghanistan War hit its worst year for U.S. armed forces with 317 Americans killed in 2009<sup>11</sup>. The President, who had sought to exit Iraq and double-down on Afghanistan<sup>12</sup>, entered a precarious public

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<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey, “Why Won't Trump Call Out Radical White Terrorism?,” *The Atlantic*, 13 August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/what-obama-could-teach-trump-about-charlottesville/536703/>.

<sup>11</sup> DiMaggio, Anthony R. *Selling War, Selling Hope: Presidential Rhetoric, the News Media, and U.S. Foreign Policy since 9/11*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2015), pg. 26.

<sup>12</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 33.

opinion situation. The American public was split on the Afghanistan War with less than half (47%) supporting the conflict and a little more than half in opposition (51%)<sup>13</sup>.

In Chart 3.1, note the heavy focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan from 2009 to 2011 followed by a bump in linking the terror threat to Iraq in 2015 and 2016. Here Obama exemplifies an attempt to set a new agenda in the war on terror, one more heavily focused on Afghanistan and al Qaeda. The President pivoted away from a discussion of Afghanistan with relation to the terror threat after the 2011 killing of bin Laden even though coalition fatalities in Afghanistan spiked in 2009 (from 295 to 521) then again in 2010 (from 521 to 710) and remained high for the next few years (563 in 2011, 402 in 2012, 162 in 2013)<sup>14</sup>. Obama, however, had already sold his surge in Afghanistan and so did not need to speak much about that conflict after 2011.

**[Insert Chart 3.1 Here]**

Adam Hodges concluded that “the Bush ‘War on Terror’ Narrative [was] a discursive formation that sustain[ed] a regime of truth”<sup>15</sup>. With the election of Barack Obama, however, that narrative “subtly slipped out of presidential discourse.” Suddenly, Afghanistan and Iraq were separate wars and not fronts in a global war against ideologically-opposed enemies<sup>16</sup>. Anthony DiMaggio emphasized that by the time Obama came to power, fear-mongering rhetoric may have lost much of its effectiveness<sup>17</sup>. Yet another reason to change thematic course. Still, these declarations of an end to Bush’s War on Terror narrative were, as we shall see, premature. Obama tamped down Bush’s rhetoric but kept alive many of the same themes.

President Obama uniformly touched on the themes gathered for this project less than Bush did – but, as the data shows, he was not averse to ratcheting up the terror threat. These differences were largely due to Obama’s reduced number of total speeches, but in some cases they had to do with a concerted effort to tone down the threat. Whereas George W. Bush’s speeches framed terrorism as a multi-front war and stated that America’s terrorist enemies were part of a worldwide conspiracy, Obama’s speeches did the opposite. Chart 3.2 compares Bush 43 and Obama on the theme of worldwide conspiracy. It shows that George W. Bush was much more likely to push this theme in his speeches and Obama decidedly was not. The line for “Yes conspiracy” depicts the speeches where this theme was present and “No conspiracy” where this theme was absent. Note that for most years under Bush, the “Yes conspiracy” line is higher and for Obama’s years the “No conspiracy” line is higher – at the very end of Obama’s term the lines do almost meet. This shows that not only in frequency but also in proportion of speeches, Bush 43 employed a strategy of linking terrorism to a

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<sup>13</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 27.

<sup>14</sup> See [icasualties.org/chart/Chart](http://icasualties.org/chart/Chart), retrieved 18 July 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Hodges, Adam. *The “War on Terror” Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2011), pg. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Hodges, *The “War on Terror” Narrative*, pg. 157.

<sup>17</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 190.

worldwide conspiracy more than President Obama did. For President Obama, the worldwide conspiracy theme was stated much less frequently and most of his speeches did not include this theme. The evidence, then, shows a concerted effort to move away from this theme.

### **[Insert Chart 3.2 Here]**

Barack Obama did mention the threat of weapons of mass destruction in his speeches on terrorism, but did so with less frequency than Bush did. President Obama mentioned the theme of the threat of WMD linked to terrorism 9 times in 2009, 8 times in 2010, twice in 2011, 4 times in 2012, 7 times in 2013, twice in 2014, 6 times in 2015, and 4 times in 2016. Many of Obama's mentions of WMD had to do with his push to eradicate nuclear weapons worldwide, a quest that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. Obama was not as focused on the threat of WMD terrorism as his predecessor was, but he was very concerned with the dismantling of these weapons. He also had to speak about these weapons repeatedly due to the civil conflict in Syria and the chemical weapons used in that war. The connection between terrorism and WMD was seen by some as an egregious oversell by the George W. Bush administration<sup>18</sup>, yet the "anti-Bush" Obama continued the use of this theme albeit to a much lesser degree.

The following paragraph from Obama's June 19, 2013 speech at Brandenburg Gate in Germany provides insights into how the President weaved the threats of WMD with terrorism and world poverty.

"We may no longer live in fear of global annihilation, but so long as nuclear weapons exist, we are not truly safe. We may strike blows against terrorist networks, but if we ignore the instability and intolerance that fuels extremism, our own freedom will eventually be endangered. We may enjoy a standard of living that is the envy of the world, but so long as hundreds of millions endure the agony of an empty stomach or the anguish of unemployment, we're not truly prosperous"<sup>19</sup>.

Here Obama is not discussing nuclear terrorism per se but does link nuclear weapons with extremism and poverty by successively discussing each issue.

### **[Insert Chart 3.3 Here]**

As Chart 3.4 depicts, Obama largely pushed aside the theme of terrorism as an existential threat to the United States. The exception being in 2015, when Obama was focused on the threat of ISIS. President Obama, as Chart 3.5 illustrates, did not hammer

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<sup>18</sup> See Mueller, John. *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*. (New York: Free Press 2006) and Lustick, Ian S. *Trapped in the War on Terror*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Obama, Barack, "Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate," 19 June 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburg-gate-berlin-germany>.

on the theme that the war on terror was necessary until his second term. Here we see a decided trend: Obama sought to recalibrate how the terror threat was viewed by narrowing the agenda of the war on terror, then he got caught flat-footed by ISIS and changed his approach to one that looked more similar to George W. Bush's.

It is critical to note here that Obama did not uniformly dismiss the terror threat and did, at times, emphasize its significance. For instance on March 27, 2009, Obama stated that, "Multiple intelligence estimates have warned that al Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the United States homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan. And if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban -- or allows al Qaeda to go unchallenged -- that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can"<sup>20</sup>. Here the existential threat from terrorism, far from being tamped down, is plainly evident in the hypothetical situation wherein a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would unleash bloodthirsty terrorists. Indeed, despite Obama's reputation to the contrary, he stated that he would not "hesitate to use force to take out terrorists" while on the campaign trail<sup>21</sup>.

**[Insert Chart 3.4 Here]**

**[Insert Chart 3.5 Here]**

Finally, Obama made a concerted effort to frame the terror threat as having lessened. Chart 3.6 depicts the speeches wherein Obama touches on the theme of a diminished terror threat. Note that George W. Bush also at times emphasized America's successes against al Qaeda leading to a reduced threat. For instance, in February 2006 Bush 43 stated that the global war on terror had "weakened" al Qaeda whilst he was selling the troop surge in Iraq<sup>22</sup>. Chart 3.7 depicts the occurrences of a similar theme in Bush and Obama's presidential speeches, that of the war on terror entailing a long war. Here Obama was much less likely to emphasize the long war that the terror conflict entailed, but did touch on this theme periodically.

**[Insert Chart 3.6 Here]**

**[Insert Chart 3.7 Here]**

## **Obama: From Anti-War Purism to Pragmatism**

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<sup>20</sup> Obama, Barack, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 27 March 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

<sup>21</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 119.

<sup>22</sup> CNN.com, "White House lists 10 foiled attacks," 15 February 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/02/09/whitehouse.plots/index.html>.

Barack Obama's vision for the War on Terror, outlined in a July 2008 campaign speech, drew from growing anti-war sentiment among the American public. Obama sought to bridge frayed alliances, largely exit the Iraq War within sixteen months and to focus American counterterror efforts on Afghanistan and specifically al-Qaeda and the Taliban there<sup>23</sup>. On Christmas Day 2009, a terrorist attempted to ignite a bomb sewn into his underwear while in a plane landing in Detroit. President Obama's response was slow and silent<sup>24</sup>. He did make a prolonged formal speech on the matter on December 29, 2009 that dealt mainly with intelligence failures that led to the foiled attack and immediate actions meant to ensure the security of air travel<sup>25</sup>. Obama's legalistic approach to the event led his opponents, like former vice president Dick Cheney, to contend that Obama "is trying to pretend that we are not at war"<sup>26</sup>.

President Obama wanted to change the tenor and tone of the war on terror. Like other progressive voices<sup>27</sup>, he sought to play down rather than ratchet up the terror threat. This impulse was meant to take the wind out of the sails of terrorists who, the thinking went, gained notoriety and power when their actions were acknowledged and feared. When Obama came into office, he reexamined the entire edifice of Bush's war on terror: the wars, the torture methods, the endless detentions. He knew where his principles stood but also wanted to understand current policy and what was possible<sup>28</sup>. Obama's pragmatism is sometimes lost in the narrative that Obama simply represented the opposite of George W. Bush and his policies. For instance, Hillary Clinton criticized Obama's approach to foreign policy as "too slow and cautious." She believed that Obama had overcorrected for his predecessor's policies. She argued that, "Great nations need organizing principles, and 'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle"<sup>29</sup>.

This narrative came from Obama's own campaign. He "campaign[ed] as the anti-George W. Bush," claiming that he would stop using the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center as an "extralegal" holding ground for terror suspects, bring terrorists before civilian courts and end the Iraq War<sup>30</sup>. Yet, rather than simply playing the reverse game plan of George W. Bush, President Obama took a decidedly pragmatic approach to foreign policy, seeking to avoid the perceived overreactions of the Bush Administration<sup>31</sup>. For instance, Obama declared "a new beginning" for American relations with the Muslim World, one in which incremental, rather than sudden, reform

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<sup>23</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pgs. 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 177.

<sup>25</sup> See Obama's 29 December 2009 speech at <http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/obamaonterrorism1.html#2009>, retrieved 16 July 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 179.

<sup>27</sup> See Mueller, *Overblown*; Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror*; Sunstein, Cass. *Laws of Fear: Beyond the Precautionary Principle*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2005); Cole, David and James X. Dempsey. *Terrorism and the Constitution: Sacrificing Civil Liberties in the Name of National Security*. (New York, NY: The New Press 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pgs. 29-30.

<sup>29</sup> Windmaier, *Presidential Rhetoric from Wilson to Obama*, pg. ix.

<sup>30</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Windmaier, *Presidential Rhetoric from Wilson to Obama*, pgs. 114-115.



would be the goal<sup>32</sup>. Bush's perceived overreactions, of course, were at least partly due to the emotional reactions to the September 11 attacks. Another early example of Obama needing to employ pragmatism came with the 2008 *Boumediene v. Bush* Supreme Court decision, which complicated things for then-candidate-Obama. The decision restored the *habeas corpus* rights of the Guantanamo Bay detainees. In other words, they could now challenge their detentions in federal court<sup>33</sup>.

When Obama came to office his civil libertarian and anti-war purism had to wrestle with a much more complicated reality than he anticipated. For instance, the military Obama came to lead was still very much on an aggressive, Global War on Terror footing<sup>34</sup>. Obama navigated this space carefully, seeking more precision and transparency in his government's use of force against terrorists<sup>35</sup>. Yet Obama was not dogmatic. Klaidman quotes a military source who noted that the President was "willing to change his mind"<sup>36</sup>.

President Obama sought to end some of the excesses of the war on terror including so-called coercive interrogation techniques<sup>37</sup>. But the extent of the use of these techniques was not fully appreciated. Attorney-General Eric Holder discovered "an interrogation regime whose psychological brutality and moral depravity went beyond anything" he had imagined<sup>38</sup>. Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, who was behind the operational planning for 9/11, had been water-boarded 183 times; Abu Zubaydah, another al Qaeda operative, was water-boarded 83 times. There were also mock executions where detainees were made to believe they had just been shot to death. Detainees "were told their children would be killed or their wives raped if they didn't cooperate. One detainee had a gun and then a power drill waved in front of his head." Holder uncovered the case of Gul Rahman, who died in custody on November 20, 2002 after having been left in the cold overnight hanging, shackled and half-naked in a secret CIA site in Kabul called the Salt Pit<sup>39</sup>. After the Bush torture memos were released, depicting tales of detainees being sleep deprived for 11 days and water-boarded, the Obama Administration was surprised to see that the public response was minimal<sup>40</sup>.

While the Obama Administration worked on closing Guantanamo, holdovers from Bush's reign exhibited confusion. Obama made it seem as if Bush had no interest in closing Guantanamo, yet Bush had "transferred more than five hundred detainees out of the camp – more than twice as many as remained." What were left were the hardest cases<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, Obama would find that there were some terrorist detainees in Guantanamo, such as one who had declared his allegiance to al Qaeda and another who

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<sup>32</sup> Windmaier, *Presidential Rhetoric from Wilson to Obama*, pg. 118.

<sup>33</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 52.

<sup>37</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pgs. 74-75.

<sup>41</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 54.

had been trained to make bombs, who could neither be tried nor released<sup>42</sup>. These he eventually reduced to forty-eight detainees<sup>43</sup>.

President Obama tried to stay true to his campaign promises while navigating a policy space that was more complicated than expected<sup>44</sup>. Unlike President George W. Bush, whose “war on terror” was oft-criticized for its excesses, President Obama got excoriated for “criminalizing” the fight against terrorists. One specific instance came when he announced that he would try 9/11 mastermind Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and some of his co-conspirators in federal court in Manhattan<sup>45</sup>. Obama’s reputation for being soft on terrorists, however, was misplaced.

## Obama and the Rhetoric of Fear

Despite his reputation to the contrary, President Obama did continue to underline the importance of combatting extremism. For instance, in a January 22, 2009 speech, he described Afghanistan as “the central front in our enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism”<sup>46</sup>. That wording may not have been specifically chosen by President George W. Bush, but it wasn’t far off from what Bush might say.

Like George W. Bush before him, Obama also vouched for a surge of troops – but this time in Afghanistan. On December 1, 2009, in a speech at West Point Military Academy, Obama mirrored Bush’s language after 9/11 stating: “We did not ask for this fight. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men hijacked four airplanes and used them to murder nearly 3,000 people. They struck our military and economic nerve centers. They took the lives of innocent men, women, and children without regard to their faith or race or station”<sup>47</sup>. Obama conceded that al-Qaeda had moved on to Pakistan but held that a troop surge in Afghanistan would stop a potential Taliban resurgence. Regarding al Qaeda, Obama sounded the alarms, stating that, “new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger; no hypothetical threat”<sup>48</sup>. Also like Bush before him, Obama tied the fight against terrorism to the promotion of freedom, democracy and human rights in the countries America had invaded<sup>49</sup>. Contrary to popular imagination, “the rhetoric of fear and hope persisted under Obama”<sup>50</sup>.

Anthony DiMaggio found that the Obama Administration was able to garner public support for the surge in Afghanistan through a calculated campaign of rhetorical persuasion<sup>51</sup>. This policy selling was successful and included an agenda shift (away from Iraq, toward Afghanistan). After the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011,

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<sup>42</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 132.

<sup>43</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 142.

<sup>44</sup> Of course, campaigns rarely concern themselves with the complications of reality, instead dealing in Utopian visions and unrealistic policy promises.

<sup>45</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Hodges, *The “War on Terror” Narrative*, pg. 158.

<sup>47</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 35.

<sup>48</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 36.

<sup>49</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 37.

<sup>50</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 55.

<sup>51</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 51.

Obama proclaimed that al Qaeda was “under more pressure than at any time since September 11” with half their leadership decimated and no way to replace it<sup>52</sup>. This framing of the conflict, as one America was decidedly winning, led to a significant withdrawal of troops (43,000 in total) from Afghanistan over the next sixteen months<sup>53</sup>.

## Obama, Drones and Credibility

Obama’s war on terror strategy deviated greatly in practice from what his supporters imagined it would be. It represented “a steady torrent of targeted killings and other kinetic operations” meant to prevent terrorists from ever getting the chance to attack Americans<sup>54</sup>. Daniel Klaidman relates that this had a marked effect on al Qaeda. A young operative noted to *Newsweek* that “no one is active and planning operations anymore...the once glorious chapter of al-Qaeda is being closed”<sup>55</sup>. Obama’s “kill list” had become a matter of course until a leak revealed to the press that Anwar Awlaki, an American citizen endowed with all of the due process and constitutional rights of such an individual, had been on the CIA death list<sup>56</sup>. The Awlaki killing raised alarm bells among civil libertarians<sup>57</sup>, but did not deter the drone program.

While President Obama fought over where Khaled Sheikh Mohammed should be tried (a civilian trial in Manhattan eventually became an impossibility for practical and political reasons), he was increasingly using the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to conduct “kinetic operations” and targeted killings<sup>58</sup>. Klaidman writes that, by 2010, “Obama had approved the killings of twice as many suspected terrorists as had ever been imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay”<sup>59</sup>. The Council on Foreign Relations finds that Obama authorized 542 drone strikes killing an estimated 3,797 people. His glibness regarding these strikes, which killed at least 324 civilians, is captured in this 2011 comment he reportedly made to a senior aide, “Turns out I’m really good at killing people. Didn’t know that was gonna be a strong suit of mine”<sup>60</sup>.

President Obama’s targeted killing strategy came to a crescendo with the operation that killed Osama bin-Laden<sup>61</sup>. The bin Laden raid also emboldened JSOC and other military commanders who salivated over the opportunity to “deliver a

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<sup>52</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pgs. 38-39.

<sup>53</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 39.

<sup>54</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 269.

<sup>55</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 270.

<sup>56</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 215; Becker, Jo and Scott Shane. “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves A Test of Obama’s Principles and Will,” *The New York Times*, 2 May 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Scahill, Jeremy. *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government’s Secret Drone Warfare Program*. (New York: Simon & Schuster 2016); Scahill, Jeremy. *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*. (New York: Nation Books 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, chapter 7 and pgs. 204-205.

<sup>59</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 118.

<sup>60</sup> Zenko, Micah, “Obama’s Final Drone Strike Data,” Council on Foreign Relations, 20 January 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/obamas-final-drone-strike-data>.

<sup>61</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 248.

‘knockout blow’” to al Qaeda via aggressive targeted killings<sup>62</sup>. At the same time, President Obama was seeing the problems inherent in capturing terrorists. Ahmed Warsame, a Somali operative, continued to be held on the USS *Boxer* given a lack of viable alternatives<sup>63</sup>. The war on terror was entering a strange middle phase where Bush’s policies were not completely unwound, where targeted killing – a policy Israel had taken considerable flak for during the Second Intifada – ran rampant, where Obama was criticized for not taking a war seriously when he was actually doing quite a lot of killing, and where the options available for detaining terrorists were scant.

Obama’s conduct in his drone war drove a wedge between his values and his practices. While he was reportedly uncomfortable with signature strikes, which are drone strikes that target groups of military-age males where intelligence on exactly who is being targeted is foggy, he pragmatically allowed them to continue<sup>64</sup>. Of course, these strikes were extremely unpopular in Pakistan<sup>65</sup>. Strikes based upon signals intelligence<sup>66</sup> alone surely would have had anti-war activists up in arms if George W. Bush had conducted them, Obama got away with these strikes with little criticism. In sum, Barack Obama’s version of the war on terror looked much different than an anti-Bush approach would. It essentially devolved into an assassination campaign<sup>67</sup>. As Daniel Klaidman summarizes:

“Barack Obama’s ferocious campaign of targeted killings was for many the central paradox of his war on terror. While running for president, he had railed against waterboarding, illegal detentions, and the Bush administration’s penchant for secrecy. In lofty speeches, he promised to restore America’s reputation as a benign superpower, a paragon of international law and human rights. But a year into his presidency, the most noticeable strategic shift in his fight against al-Qaeda was the unrelenting use of hard, lethal power in the form of the CIA’s covert drone program. By the time Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2009, he had authorized more drone strikes than George W. Bush had approved during this entire presidency. (There were only 9 strikes conducted in Pakistan between 2004 and 2007. In 2010 there were 111)”<sup>68</sup>.

The juxtaposition of “lofty speeches” and a Nobel Peace Prize pitted against an ugly campaign of assassinations in an ever-broadening terror war led to the loss of President Obama’s credibility on the issue of terrorism.

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<sup>62</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 252.

<sup>63</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 249.

<sup>64</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 41-42.

<sup>65</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 41.

<sup>66</sup> Signals intelligence is intelligence gleaned from intercepting communication signals such as cell phone conversations. One problem with this method is that it relies on tracking source devices rather than individuals so that strikes could be called on the locations of communication devices such as cellphones without knowledge of who is in possession of these devices at the time.

<sup>67</sup> Scahill, *The Assassination Complex*; Scahill, *Dirty Wars*.

<sup>68</sup> Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, pg. 117.

## President Obama and Credibility Gaps: Benghazi, Syria and ISIS

The ever-expanding drone war strained President Obama's anti-war, civil libertarian credentials. But, Obama's policy of toning down the terror threat really began to unravel when the U.S. embassy was attacked in Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012. Four Americans were killed in the attack and ten injured. Yet Obama avoided using the word "terrorism" completely in his *60 Minutes* interview the next day<sup>69</sup>. Instead his administration blamed the attack on spontaneous "protests" made in response to an anti-Muslim Youtube video<sup>70</sup>. When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Obama's doctrinaire anti-war approach also caught him flat-footed as the conflict metastasized into a gruesome conflagration replete with wantonly violent insurgents, foreign fighters and chemical bombings. Obama's credibility gap grew as the failure of Benghazi was coupled with the failure to act against the August 2013 chemical attacks committed by the Syrian government against its own people<sup>71</sup>.

The rise of ISIS would only erode the President's credibility further. Consistent with a rhetorical game plan set on assuaging the public and reducing the notoriety of terrorists, Obama sought to play down the threat from ISIS. Recall that Obama's agenda-setting goals were to erase the mistake of Iraq by withdrawing from that conflict and to employ rhetoric to diminish the terror threat<sup>72</sup>. When ISIS conquered Mosul in June 2014, Obama's rhetorical strategy collapsed. Five months earlier, the President had unfortunately dubbed ISIS "the jayvee team" in an interview with *The New Yorker*<sup>73</sup>. He explained that, "If a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant"<sup>74</sup>. In May 2014, Obama drew a line between his preferred methods of counterterrorism and war, implying that Bush's policies were wrong or over-expansive and that new policies would be more precise<sup>75</sup>. Regrettably, Obama's desire to drop the Iraq conflict led him to ignore the anti-Sunni dictatorship that had been forming under Nuri al-Maliki<sup>76</sup>. While Obama was touting Iraq's march toward democracy in 2011, Iraq's deputy prime minister was stating that Maliki was the worst dictator the country had ever seen<sup>77</sup>.

The fall of Mosul and the subsequent massacre and enslavement of Yazidis two months later, finally pulled Obama's attention to ISIS. The U.S. began a bombing campaign against the group in early August 2014, but toward the end of the month

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<sup>69</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 248.

<sup>70</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 249; Nakoula, Nakoula Bessely, "The Innocence of Muslims," banned Youtube film, 1 July 2012. See Wikipedia, "The Innocence of Muslims," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innocence\\_of\\_Muslims](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innocence_of_Muslims).

<sup>71</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 279.

<sup>72</sup> Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. (New York: Regan Arts 2015), pg. 115.

<sup>73</sup> Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, pg. xii.

<sup>74</sup> McCarthy, Tom, "'Degrade and Destroy': A Look Back at Obama's Evolution on ISIS," *The Guardian*, 6 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/06/obama-statements-isis-timeline>.

<sup>75</sup> McCarthy, "'Degrade and Destroy'".

<sup>76</sup> Frontline, "The Rise of ISIS," 28 October 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/rise-of-isis/>.

<sup>77</sup> Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, pg. 96.

President Obama stated that America still did not have a strategy for ISIS. It was not until September 2014 that Obama declared that America's goal would be to "degrade and destroy" the Islamic State<sup>78</sup>.

To his credit, Obama had attempted to withhold acknowledgment of the group in the hopes that doing so might take the wind out of their sails. This strategy of attempting to diminish the terror threat came straight from the anti-Bush playbook. Yet, the strategy had either run its course or was miscast in this role. ISIS turned out to be a venerable and deadly foe that Obama eventually would attack with considerable military might. Obama had also lost on his bet that withdrawing from Iraq would pay off in the long run. The vacuum created by U.S. withdrawal and Maliki's anti-Sunni dictatorship had forged the conditions that led to the formation of ISIS<sup>79</sup>.

With the rise of ISIS, the rhetoric of fear once again made a comeback under Obama. For instance, Obama called ISIS "a cancer" on September 10, 2014<sup>80</sup>. Obama's focus on ISIS drove the previously isolationist public to support conflict against the group in Iraq and in Syria<sup>81</sup>. In the end, Obama's goals of closing Guantanamo, ending the Iraq War and conducting a more humane anti-terror campaign were all scuppered.

### **Conclusion: Obama as Bush Lite?**

The view of President Obama as soft on terrorism still resonates. His opponents have accused him of not taking the war on terror seriously, of viewing it as strictly a domestic law enforcement matter, and of refusing to acknowledge that "Islamic radicals" were behind terrorism<sup>82</sup>. A key criticism seemed to stem from President Obama's alleged over-sympathy for Muslims and his concomitant adherence to universalist values<sup>83</sup>. This criticism became a common trope in the 2016 Republican Presidential campaign where candidates challenged Obama to call America's adversaries "radical Islamic terrorists"<sup>84</sup>.

The reality of Obama's rhetoric and conduct were much different. Jessica Stern wrote that Obama basically continued the same plan for countering terrorism that George W. Bush did. Obama's rhetoric may have been more scant and idealistic, while Bush's was more voluminous and aggressive, but Stern found few other differences. Stern saw state failure in the Middle East, and more specifically the rise of ISIS, as a

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<sup>78</sup> McCarthy, "Degrade and Destroy".

<sup>79</sup> While ISIS was a repackaging of al Qaeda in Iraq, AQI had been largely dormant for years before the combined conditions of Maliki's oppression of Sunnis, America's withdrawal from Iraq and the civil war in Syria set the stage for ISIS' rise.

<sup>80</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 293.

<sup>81</sup> DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope*, pg. 303.

<sup>82</sup> Basile, Thomas J. "The War On Terrorism: Choosing To Fight The George W. Bush Way Again." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 20 Nov. 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbasile/2015/11/20/its-time-to-revisit-george-w-bushs-global-anti-terror-strategy/#32771e6fdce5](http://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbasile/2015/11/20/its-time-to-revisit-george-w-bushs-global-anti-terror-strategy/#32771e6fdce5); Diaz, Daniella, "Obama: Why I Won't Say 'Islamic Terrorism,'" CNN.com, 28 September 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/28/politics/obama-radical-islamic-terrorism-cnn-town-hall/index.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Basile, "The War on Terrorism".

<sup>84</sup> Diaz, "Obama: Why I Won't Say 'Islamic Terrorism'".

major factor in the continued need to focus on the terror threat. While Obama stopped Bush's harsh interrogation techniques, he turned a blind eye as America's Middle East allies continued to employ them. His extensive drone strike program served as a counterweight against his strategy of engagement with communities where extremists were located<sup>85</sup>.

Far from the "anti-Bush," Peter Feaver described Obama as "Bush Lite." Feaver argued that Obama continued most of Bush's strategies with only slight deviations. George W. Bush set the terror war agenda as one that was bent on a moral crusade. Bush explained that moral values and America's commitment to protect human rights were more important than material factors such as "the balance of military forces." President Obama had a similar point of view and believed in "an endless campaign to impose our values." Both leaders stated repeatedly that weapons of mass destruction getting into the hands of terrorists was a very important and serious threat to America. President Obama emphasized global leadership and global security in his national security strategy (NSS). He said that both of these depend on the presence of responsible American leadership, which was the theme of Bush's national security strategy as well. Bush's NSS explained that, "the international community is most engaged in such action when the United States leads." Obama put less emphasis on the point that America was at war than Bush did, but his national security strategy reflected a similar view of the conflict<sup>86</sup>. As the charts and data above evidenced, Obama attempted to be more narrow in his definition of America's adversaries, yet his conduct belied a wide view of the war on terror including drone strikes in Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen.

Trevor McCrisken contends that Obama's continuation of Bush's policies was all by design. McCrisken argues that Obama's supporters "selectively" listened to his speeches and missed the themes of counterterrorism present in Obama's words. The author even notes that former Bush officials were "shaking their heads with amazement" at the continuity of Bush's policies under the supposedly transformational, liberal Obama<sup>87</sup>.

President Obama did speak substantially less about the terror threat than Bush 43 did and he did more to try to diminish it. However, he did not have many policies to sell and the agenda had been set for him. Further, Americans were firmly concerned with terrorism. Barack Obama's idealistic campaigning was twisted by a complex reality that, given the vast resources committed to the war on terror, had an inertia of its own. Obama's general rhetorical arc looked similar to his rhetorical evolution on terrorism. Jeffrey Tulis praised Obama for his pragmatism and his ability to provide "a series of concrete responses to practical problems." At first, Obama was criticized for

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<sup>85</sup> Stern, Jessica. "Obama and Terrorism." *Foreign Affairs*, 2 October 2015, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/obama-and-terrorism](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/obama-and-terrorism).

<sup>86</sup> Feaver, Peter. "Obama's National Security Strategy: Real Change or Just 'Bush Lite?'" *Foreign Policy*, 27 May 2010, [foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/27/obamas-national-security-strategy-real-change-or-just-bush-lite/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/27/obamas-national-security-strategy-real-change-or-just-bush-lite/).

<sup>87</sup> McCrisken, Trevor, "Ten Years On: Obama's War on Terrorism in Rhetoric and Practice," *International Affairs* 87: 4 (2011), pgs. 781-785.

not using his oratory enough in his quest to frame himself as a post-partisan leader. Unfortunately, Obama caved to his critics when, three years into his first term, he devolved into a partisan campaigner<sup>88</sup>.

President Obama's paucity of major terrorism speeches is actually evidence that he and his predecessor carried out similar policies. Obama made fewer speeches because he sold fewer policies—he mostly kept Bush's policies alive. He could have made a more concerted push to close Guantanamo, but the intricacies of the legal and political process stifled him. He did push a surge in Afghanistan and a fight against ISIS. To his credit, both policies were successfully sold to an American public that was now used to the fight against global terrorism.

Obama only slightly adjusted Bush's policies and, in many cases, sold similar themes regarding the terror threat. Since the agenda in the war against terror—an expansive, global war—had been set, Obama did not have to make speeches to continue with the existing status quo. This he largely did, with the notable exceptions of his ending the Bush torture program and attempting to end the Iraq War. The drone assassination program he greatly expanded was kept (an open) secret and he did not attempt to sell it to the American public.

In the end, Obama's recalibration of the terror threat left America where it had been before: still at war in Iraq and Afghanistan with international terrorists and with the same apparatus at home for fighting terrorists including the USA Patriot Act and Department of Homeland Security. Obama's cooler rhetoric, as depicted in the charts and tables above, was meant to reduce the threat felt by the American public, but it instead caught him flat-footed as ISIS took over large regions of Iraq and Syria. After the rise of ISIS, Obama's turn back to the narrative set by Bush was complete as he emphasized the fearful and militaristic themes established by his predecessor. In the next chapter we turn to President Donald Trump whose rhetoric and policies have ushered in a new era of Islamophobia. Trump, like Obama, set out to undo the policies and rhetorical tenor of his predecessor.

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<sup>88</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, pg. 221.